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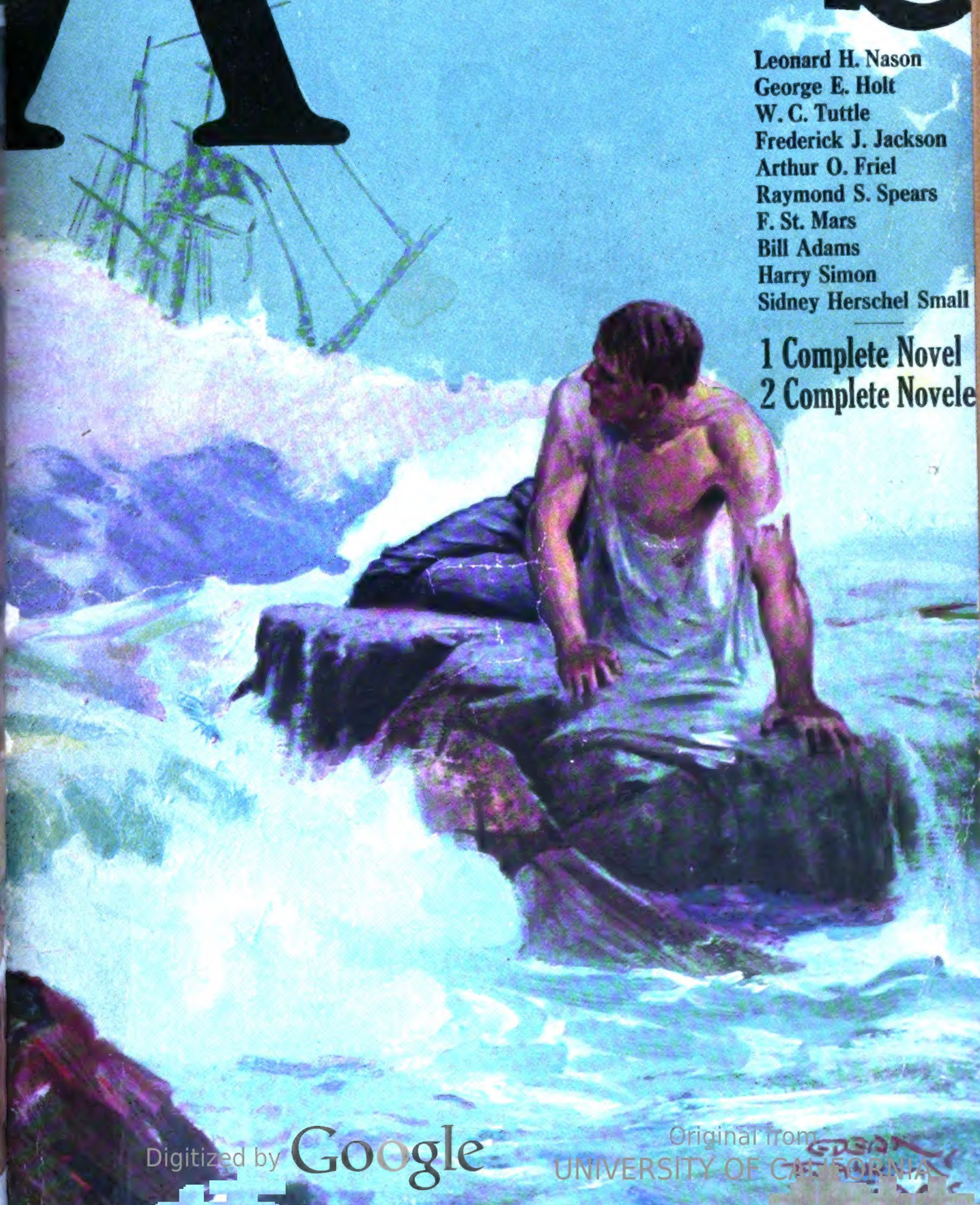
Adventure



Leonard H. Nason
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***Adventure* is out on the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month**

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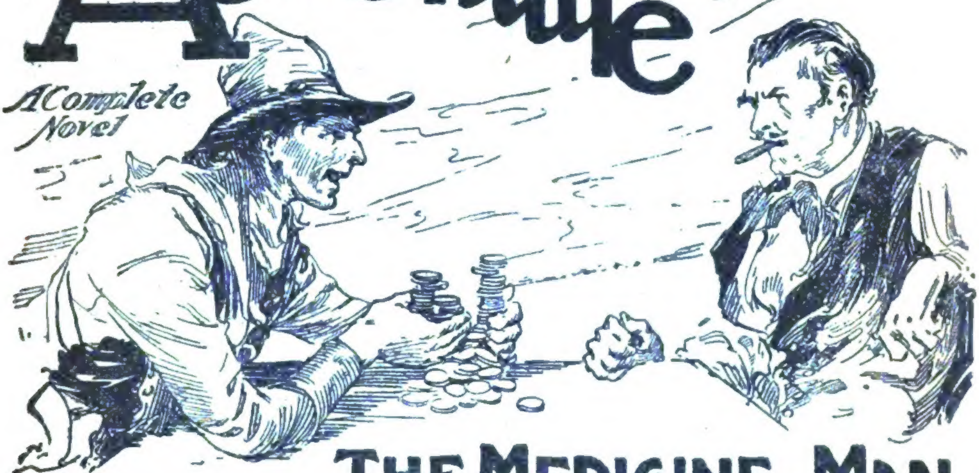
A Complete Novel



by W C Tuttle

THE MEDICINE-MAN

Author of "Hashknife and the Fantom Riders," "According to Ng Loy," etc.

BUD DALEY sat humped over on his wash-bench near the kitchen door of his unpretentious little ranch-house, staring with moody blue eyes across the hills. The wash-bench was sloppy with soap-suds, plain evidence that Bud had performed his ablutions in a violent manner.

And as he sat looking moodily into space, he dangled a none-too-clean towel in his hands. Just behind him, leaning against the side of the kitchen door, stood Mrs. Daley, a thoughtful frown on her pretty face. She was dressed in a plain calico dress, faded from many washings; a girlish looking woman, whose crown of glorious auburn hair tumbled in unruly fashion about her face.

Bud's visible attire consisted of a battered sombrero, a thin blue shirt, wide open at the neck, a pair of bat-winged chaps, boots and holstered gun. His thin face was decorated with several days' growth of beard. Down in the little corral, which was hooked to the long, low barn, a roan horse, sweat-marked, rolled wearily.

Bud's eyes turned from the panorama of low hills, which swept away across the Modoc ranges, and his fingers searched his pockets for tobacco and cigaret papers.

"Bud, are you sure?" Mrs. Daley spoke softly, a trifle hopefully.

"Yeah," Bud nodded and licked the edge of the paper, "I reckon it's a fact, May."

"Then it means that we're—broke?"

"Broke?"

The match burned Bud's fingers, and he snapped it away as he turned and looked at her.

"May, we're worse than that. I still owe Cleve Lavelle five thousand dollars."

"As much as that, Bud?"

There were tears in her voice. Bud laughed shortly and got to his feet.

"Just that much, May."

"But—but where have the cattle gone? Surely——"

"They've been stolen!" said Bud savagely. "Somebody has rustled every head of Triangle-D stock in the Modoc country. By ——, we haven't even got a hide nor a horn to show.

"I told Cleve Labelle. He was at the round-up, May. They were all there; every puncher in this country. I tell you, we combed every inch of the county, and

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there wasn't a cattleman there, except me, that wasn't satisfied."

"Was Uncle Jimmy Miller there, Bud?"

"Yeah, he was there. He exploded over it. Just the same as told me I was a —— liar. But he found out that I was right. Oh, we're broke; that's a cinch."

Bud threw the towel aside and backed against the wall.

"But, Bud, we must have had close to five hundred head," said Mrs. Daley. "Why, you can't lose five hundred head of cattle."

"Can't we?" Bud laughed bitterly. "I wish you was right, May. I kept sayin' the same thing—until I had it proved to me. Somebody just—well—" Bud shrugged his shoulders wearily—"they took 'em, thassall."

"Well—" Mrs. Daley sighed deeply and patted him on the shoulder—"we're not very lucky, Bud. Dinner is ready."

"I'm not hungry, May. It kinda hits me in the pit of m' stummick."

"Starving won't help you any, dear."

"I s'pose not." Bud grinned and shook his head. "I reckon I've got to keep m' head up and m' stummick full. I wish——"

Two riders swung around the corner of the cottonwood clump beyond the barn and came toward the house, causing Bud's wish to go unfinished.

"It's Uncle Jimmy Miller and 'Sody' Slavin," said Mrs. Daley.

"Two of the toughest old pelicans that ever wore a boot," remarked Bud as they rode up and dismounted.

Uncle Jimmy Miller was only five feet four inches tall, thin of frame, thin of voice, with the whiskers of a gray old bob-cat and an explosive disposition.

Sody Slavin was nearly six feet tall and so fat that he could hardly find a saddle-horse strong enough to carry him more than half a day at a time. Sody talked in a counter-tenor voice and panted at all times. He was of a nervous temperament and so tick-lish that everything annoyed him. Uncle Jimmy owned the JM outfit—one of the big cattle outfits of the Modoc—and Sody was his foreman.

"'Lo, Mrs. Daley," called Sody. "Nice weather we're havin'."

"Hello, Mr. Slavin," she answered, smiling.

"Mister!" he snorted indignantly.

"Mrs.!" she shot right back at him.

"All right, May. I didn't want to call you May right in front of yore husband; but if you ain't scared of him, I ain't."

"That's what polite folks calls 'small-talk', I reckon," observed Uncle Jimmy. "Anyway, it's too —— small to pay for the wear and tear on yore teeth."

Uncle Jimmy spat dryly and turned to Bud.

"Well, whatcha know about it, Bud?"

"Not any more than I did before."

"Uh-huh." Uncle Jimmy scratched his mustache violently.

"Aw, they must 'a' strayed," said Sody. "Dog-gone it, yuh——"

"They did, like ——!" snorted Uncle Jimmy. "Sody, you ain't got—— My ——, you make me mad, Sody! Must 'a' strayed! Since when did one brand of cows all git together and vamoose? Mebbe they didn't like to associate with the other brands, eh? Sody, you do think of the dangdest, craziest answers to questions."

"Mebbe I'm wrong," said Sody contritely.

"Mebbe!"

"You ain't got no better answer," grinned Sody. "They're all gone, ain't they? They must 'a' went away together."

"Yeah! With some range-burglars fannin' their south ends with a lariat."

Bud grinned in spite of his loss. To Uncle Jimmy and Sody Slavin, life was just one argument after another. At times the arguments grew so personal that Uncle Jimmy would fire Sody. He was known to have discharged Sody three times in one day, and Sody was known to have quit his job three times in one day. And the majority of their arguments were over things that neither of them knew anything about; which neither would admit.

"Well, let's not fight over it," said Bud. "They're gone, thassall."

"I know it," nodded Uncle Jimmy. "I know they're gone, Bud; but that—that——"

"Your Mister Slavin," suggested Sody sweetly.

"Yea-a-a-ah!" snorted Uncle Jimmy. "My mister!"

"What's the joke?" asked Bud.

"Joke, ——!" exploded Uncle Jimmy. "When Sody took that trip to Frisco he went out to a packin' plant. I s'pose he lied to 'em about the cows we've got out here, and all that. You know how a danged half-wit like him would talk. Anyway, I got a letter from the packer, and he says.

" 'Regardin' a conversation with your Mr. Slavin.'

"My Mister Slavin! He ain't mine, Bud. That's the only thing that saves him. If he was mine, I'd——"

"You wouldn't have to," interrupted Sody. "If I belonged to you, I'd 'a' grieved m'self to death long ago. There is things that flesh and blood can't stand."

"And you're one of 'em," declared Uncle Jimmy.

"If the argument is over, we might eat," smiled Mrs. Daley.

"It never was no argument, as far as I was concerned," said Uncle Jimmy. "I—I— Now, Sody, if you open your danged mouth, I'll——"

"Who's openin' their mouth?" demanded Sody. "You took exceptions to a statement I made, didn't yuh? Yeah, yuh did, too. I'll bet you don't even know what I said that started the argument."

"Don't I? The—— I don't! Huh! Do you?"

"Nope," said Sody honestly.

Uncle Jimmy stared at him for several moments, his mustache working violently Then he turned his head and looked at Mrs. Daley, his face breaking into an expansive smile.

"May, you sure do look fine," he observed sincerely. "If I was thirty years younger, I'd sure steal yuh away from that good-for-nothin' husband of yours."

Mrs. Daley laughed lightly, but Bud's laugh was bitter, as he unbuckled and kicked off his chaps.

"They've stole everythin' else from me, Uncle Jimmy."

"Yeah, that's true, I reckon."

Uncle Jimmy turned and squinted reflectively at the sunswept hills of Modocland.

"Yeah, they've plumb cleaned yuh out, Bud. 'S far as I can see, yuh ain't got hide nor horn in this county. We've been free of rustlin' for a long time in the Modocs; but every once in a while they steps out and starts in where they left off. But I don't sabe it yet—nossir. Mebbe I've lost a few head—I dunno."

"May jist said that dinner was waitin'," reminded Sody.

"Well, who said she didn't?" demanded Uncle Jimmy. "You're always tryin' to start an argument, Sody."

"No such a danged thing!" Sody shook his head violently. "I never start arguments, Jim. You start 'em, and then——"

"Let's eat," suggested Bud.

Thus ended another argument that might have lasted several minutes—and ended nowhere.

THE Fall round-up of the Modoc country had just been completed, and in all those thousands of cattle there was not a single one bearing Bud Daley's Triangle D brand. It was unbelievable, but true. An army of cowboys had ridden for days, combing the hills so thoroughly that hardly an animal had escaped them.

And all of them knew that Bud Daley owned at least five hundred head of cattle, outside of possible increase. Bud had been foreman for Uncle Jimmy Miller for a year; a top-hand cow-man, who had gained the respect of every one during that one year.

But Bud was not content with a salary. He had married May Lloyd, the prettiest girl in the Red Hills range country, and he wanted to make good for her sake. For a few hundred dollars he had acquired the Triangle ranch and iron, which he had had registered as the Triangle D. Bud had a little money, which he invested in stock, starting his little herd.

Then he had gone to Cleve Lavelle, the political and cattle power of the Modoc country, and borrowed five thousand dollars, which he invested in cattle—or rather, all except two hundred dollars. Bud was a gambler. As soon as his cattle buying was over he went into the Rest Ye All gambling-house, which was owned by Cleve Lavelle, and won ten thousand dollars at roulette.

But, instead of paying Lavelle the borrowed money, he went out and bought cattle with every cent of it. This gave him a respectable-sized herd, and, barring the unforeseen, Bud Daley was destined to become a regular cattleman.

Cleve Lavelle came in for a great amount of good-natured joking over the fact that Bud had cleaned out the gambling-house, but Lavelle was a cool-nerved gambler and merely smiled. It was all in the game. Perhaps he felt that Bud should have paid his debts, but did not say so. Lavelle was close-mouthed, and his square, deep-lined face, thin lips and level gray eyes told nothing.

Lavelle owned the 76 A cattle outfit, located about six miles from the town of Modoc, where he employed a big crew of cowboys and broncho-riders. Lavelle broke many horses for the Eastern markets and took pride in the fact that he had the hardest riding crew of punchers in the county.

And Lavelle was the political power in Modoc County. He was a mixer, known as a square-shooter, but the political pot of the county was mixed in Lavelle's private office at the rear of the ornate Rest Ye All gambling-house in Modoc. Whether or not the ingredients were according to the pure political ideas of some of the people, they were according to Cleve Lavelle.

Bud Daley had not the slightest idea of who had taken his stock. If he had, he would not have gone to see Dug Breed, the sheriff, the day after the close of the round-up. Bud did not like Dug Breed. He had opposed Dug at the election of the year before, and Dug had not forgotten it. He was a square-built man, about forty years of age, with harsh features, narrow lips and eyes that flashed green in anger.

Breed was a competent officer, saying little, drinking none and paying strict attention to running the sheriff's office. To him went Bud. He had heard of Bud's loss. Every one in the Modoc range knew of it, Breed had little to say, but Bud felt that he did not believe that the stock had been stolen.

"You ain't sold any stock lately have you, Daley?" he asked.

"Sold any?" Bud shook his head, and it suddenly drawned upon him that the sheriff was hinting that he had sold his stock and was trying to claim that he had been robbed. For a moment he had difficulty in holding his temper.

"Mebbe," said the sheriff suggestively, "they were herded out through the Crooked Cañon country and shipped from Black Wells.

The Crooked Cañon country lay to the West of Bud's ranch, and Black Wells was a small shipping-point thirty miles from Modoc. Before the advent of the railroad into Modoc, Black Wells had been the shipping-point for all of the Modoc range.

"That's probably where they went," admitted Bud slowly, "And Black Wells ain't a place where yuh can get reliable information."

"No, it's a pretty safe place," said the sheriff thoughtfully, "Folks over there mind their own business. This kinda leaves you in a bad shape, don't it, Daley?"

"Well," Bud smiled a trifle, "I've still got my health and the Triangle D ranch."

"I mean—you're kinda left in debt, ain't yuh?"

"Am I?'' Bud's lips shut tightly for a moment. "Where did yuh get that idea, Breed?"

"It ain't an idea, Daley. In fact, it's none of my business; but everybody knows that you couldn't accumulate a herd of that size in a year and not be in debt. I hope you're not. And if you are, I hope that yuh won't be stuck for the payment."

"Stuck for it?"

"You know what I mean—have the ranch taken away from yuh."

Bud laughed softly as he rolled a cigaret. The ranch-house, brand and the water-rights to a few springs had cost him less than five hundred dollars. The repairs would not amount to more than two hundred more.

"You were just gettin' a good start," observed the sheriff.

Bud threw away his match and looked quizzically at the sheriff.

"Breed, I didn't come here for sympathy," he said slowly. "If that's what I wanted, —— knows I'd never come to you. I've been robbed, dontcha understand? Ain't it kinda up to you to do something besides settin' there and feelin' sorry for me?"

Breed frowned heavily for a moment, looking down at the toes of his boots. Bud turned away and moved over to the open door. He had not expected much from Breed; so he was not disappointed.

"Did you think I was offerin' you sympathy?" asked Breed.

"I hoped you wasn't," said Bud, without turning his head.

"Well, I wasn't." Breed laughed shortly and turned back to some papers on his desk.

Bud turned and looked at Breed, but the latter did not look up. For a moment Bud's lips curled with anger, and he rubbed an itching palm across the brass heads of the cartridges in his belt. He knew that Breed was a fighter, a dangerous man to provoke; yet every drop of fighting blood in his body cried out against the injustice of an officer refusing assistance because of a personal grudge.

But he fought down the desire to tell Breed what he thought of him and to back up his opinions with hot lead. Bud knew that one of them would probably never walk out of the place—possibly both. If the sheriff killed him, it would be easy to explain; but if he killed the sheriff—that would be a difficult situation.

SO HE turned, stepped out on the sidewalk and crossed the street to the Rest Ye All saloon. It was the slack time of the day, and he found Cleve Lavelle in his private office, reading a newspaper.

Lavelle put the paper aside, motioned Bud to a chair and waited for him to speak.

"You heard what happened to me, didn't yuh, Lavelle?" asked Bud.

Lavelle nodded curtly. He did not seem greatly concerned.

"I'm broke, I reckon," continued Bud. "Somebody has cleaned me out as slick as a rifle-barrel."

"I heard about it," said Lavelle. "Well?"

"Well?" Bud swallowed hard and shifted his position. "Well, I'm broke, thasall. I owe you five thousand dollars, Lavelle."

"You do."

"Due next month," said Bud.

"The first of the month, Daley."

"All right. It looks to me like it was just too bad, thasall."

"You can't pay it?" Coldly.

"What with?"

"Mm-m-m." Lavelle rubbed his chin with a hand that was just a trifle over-decorated with diamonds. Bud estimated that just one of those white stones would cost more than his debt.

"What's your ranch worth, Daley?" asked Lavelle.

"That's a question," replied Bud thoughtfully. "It ain't for sale."

"Possibly not," smiled Lavelle," but under the present situation, I might have to take it over."

"I reckon I get yore idea," nodded Bud, "but I didn't come with that idea in mind a-tall, Lavelle. Yuh see, it's like this: yo're a gambler, Lavelle. You ain't got a ghost of a chance to ever get that five thousand. My ranch ain't worth a fifth of that amount."

"I understand that!" snapped Lavelle.

"You've set into big games," continued Bud, ignoring the interruption. "You've been stuck for five thousand dollars lots of times. Did you quit, Lavelle?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you quit the game, when you was five thousand in it?"

"No." Lavelle shook his head. "No, I never quit, but——"

"Yo're into my game five thousand dollars, Lavelle. If you quit now, you lose five thousand; if you back me again, you've got a chance to get yore money back."

"Like —— I have!" Lavelle threw back his head and laughed. "Daley, you've got more nerve than a bank-robber. Do you think I'd gamble at those odds?"

Bud did not laugh. His blue eyes bored into Lavelle's face, and his jaw was set tight.

"You sure make me laugh," declared Lavelle.

"Ten thousand dollars would put me on my feet, Lavelle," persisted Bud. "Inside of three years——"

"They'd clean you out again," finished Lavelle. "No, you've got me all wrong, Daley. On the first of next month, you be here with five thousand dollars."

Lavelle dropped a heavy fist on the polished surface of his desk.

"In the first place, I don't think that anybody robbed you. It isn't reasonable, Daley. Look at the thing right."

Bud got to his feet and stood looking down at Lavelle.

"Just what do you mean by that remark, Lavelle?"

"Figure it out for yourself, Daley."

"You mean that I——"

Bud leaned forward, his hands clenched tightly, as he stared down at Lavelle.

"Hold your temper," advised Lavelle. "You're not a good bluffer, Daley."

"I'm not goin' to bluff," said Bud slowly. "I'm goin' to mean everythin' I say to you, Lavelle. Yo're ——"

"Wait a moment," interrupted Lavelle. "You are going to say something that you'll be sorry for, Daley. You already owe me more than you want to pay, and you are sore because I won't lend you more. Your opinions of me are of no interest to any one, except yourself; so tell them to yourself and save trouble."

Bud relaxed slowly and a grin wreathed his lips. Then he laughed and turned to the door.

"All right, Lavelle. I reckon that's good advice. I'm sorry I acted like a fool, and I'll try to have that money for yuh."

Bud crossed the gambling-room and entered the bar, where he found Sody Slavin and "Dinah" Blewette. Dinah was a little dark-skinned cowpuncher from the JM ranch, with an impediment in his speech, bow-legs and a totally bald head.

They greeted Bud effusively and expansively. Between them they owned the world and were perfectly willing to cut their share to thirds. Would he accept?

"I ain't a bit dry," protested Bud. "Not a danged bit, boys."

"Bud's had grief," explained Sody, while Dinah listened attentively. "He's sure had flocks of grief, Dinah."

"Sh-sure," agreed Dinah, nodding violently, which caused his sombrero to shift in a circle on his bald dome.

"I—I—I—I—I——"

"That's all from you," interrupted Sody. "Me and Bud will do all the talkin', Dinah. Thasall right, we'll excuse yuh from participatin' in conversation. You nod or shake, thasall."

Dinah's lips worked convulsively for a moment, as if trying to frame a protest; but he broke into an expansive grin and turned to the bar, signaling frantically for the bartender to show more speed.

Bud could not resist their invitation. It had been a long time since he had taken a drink, and the potent liquor lifted him out of his blue haze and transported him into a world which was filled with rose-tinted atmosphere.

Lavelle came through the barroom a little later, but none of the three cowboys paid any attention to him. Other cowboys, with their round-up stakes in their pockets, were invading the place, anxious for their drinks and a chance to woo the Goddess of Luck.

"She's goin' to be a big night," declared Sody. "A big night."

"Yuh — yuh — yuh — yuh — " choked Dinah.

"Yuh betcha," said Sody, anticipating what Dinah was trying to say. "Now, you stop that, Dinah. Yo're a good cowboy and I like yuh fine; but you never was intended to talk."

"Tha—tha—tha—tha——"

"That's right," prompted Bud, nodding violently. "We know all about yuh, Dinah." And then to Sody, "I'll make yuh a little bet that Dinah can't say 'Piper Heidsick' inside of five minutes."

"Not with me yuh don't," grinned Sody. "The last time he tried to say it, he was plumb unconscious for an hour. My gosh, he jist chokes plumb to death. Uncle Jimmy wanted him to bring some chewin' tobacco one day. Uncle Jimmy chaws Piper; so he tells Dinah to bring him some. 'Shorty' Ryan was workin' out there at that time, and he chaws Star. He wanted some, too.

"Well, Dinah comes down to the store and horns up to the counter. He was goin' to order the Star first. They tells me that he started to siss-s-s— You know what I mean? Well, he keeps it up for so long that everybody thought he was loaded to the gills with sody water. Dinah sees that it ain't goin' to be no success; so he decides to buy the Piper Heidsick first.

"Well, I reckon the change didn't do Dinah no good, 'cause he collapsed before he ever got past the pup part of it."

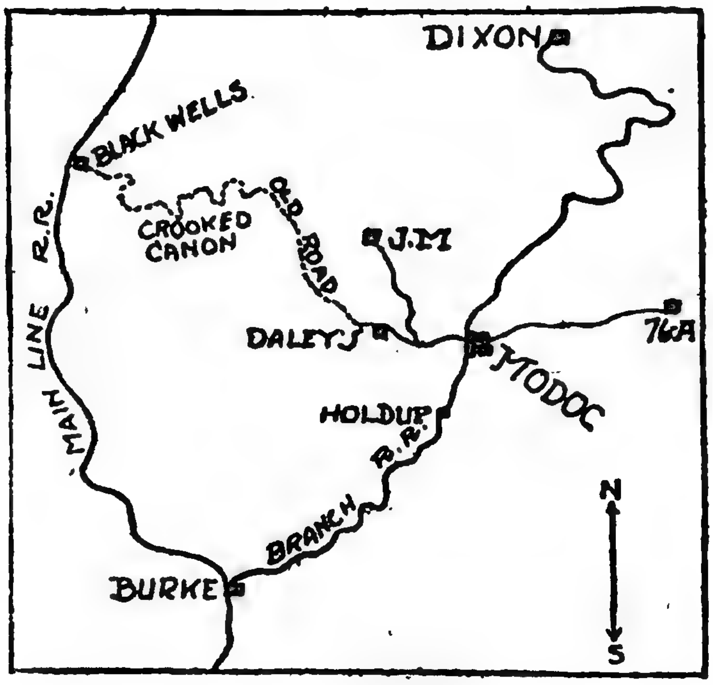
DINAH took it good-naturedly, but tried for the next fifteen minutes to tell Bud that Sody's story was a —— lie. Bud knew what Dinah wanted to say; so everybody was satisfied. Things were going along fine, until some of the 4-A cowboys came in, loaded for bear.

Among them was "Short-Horn" Adams, a fat-faced, blear-eyed puncher, who had in some way incurred the displeasure of Dinah Blewette. Dinah was getting all tuned to sing a song, when he happened to see Short-Horn. Dinah proceeded to swing his heavy beer-glass overhanded and threw it with all his strength at his enemy.

It was a good shot—except that Dinah threw it at Short-Horn's reflection in the back-bar mirror, causing the big mirror to radiate cracks in every direction and creating havoc among the stacks of glittering glassware on the back-bar.

Dug Breed happened to be among those present and proceeded to collar the luckless Dinah, who was but a handful for Breed. As a result of his reverse-English marksmanship Dinah would have probably spent the night in the Modoc jail but about that time Sody Slavin accidently tangled his feet with those of Dug Breed, and the sheriff sat down hard.

And Dinah ducked like a rabbit, although a trifle uncertain of gait, while the cow-punchers cheered everybody concerned.



Breed got to his feet, blazing with wrath, only to be met with words of apology and regret from Sody Slavin.

"My gosh, that was awful," explained Sody. "I dunno how in —— m' feet ever got over there."

Sody seemed very sincere and serious. Breed glared at him, his fists clenched tightly at his sides. There was no doubt that the sheriff was fighting mad.

But Sody ignored the sheriff's attitude as he kept on explaining:

"I must 'a' slipped, dontcha know it? I'm sure-footed, too. I must 'a' stepped on somethin' with m' left foot, and m' right swung like this."

Sody's exaggerated slip caused him to lose balance and his swinging right foot caught Breed on the shin-bone of his right leg. It was a painful thing. Sody was badly off balance; so he grabbed at the yelping sheriff and they both went down, half-under a table, with Sody on top.

The fall half-stunned Breed, but did not affect Sody, who got to his feet, still apologizing, and dragged his spurred heel across the sheriff's knee-cap as he stepped away. Breed struggled to his feet and leaned on the table, panting and cursing painfully. He was so mad that his eyes were shut.

Then Bud blundered into the table, knocking away the sheriff's visible means of support; and he and Sody went out through the front door. They heard the sheriff hit the floor again, and his curses were wonderful to hear; but Sody and Bud were too joyful to care about mere words.

"Oh, m' ——!" wheezed Sody, clinging to Bud. "It went jist like clockwork, Bud. Ain't I the thinker? Ain't I? And then you moved the table away from him! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"He'll try to kill us both," choked Bud.

"He can't. It's ag'in' the law, Bud."

"He's so mad that the law won't stop him, Sody."

"All right," laughed Sody. "I hope I don't die so painful that I can't take time to think of how I kicked him in the shin, fell on top of him and then spurred him in the knee. Ha-ha-ha! And every danged bit of it was accidental, too."

"I couldn't help bumpin' into that table," added Bud. "I was so drunk I never knowed what I was doin'. I wonder where Dinah went?"

"He won't go far," gasped Sody. "What did the —— fool bust that mirror for? Why, he jist whaled away at it with his glass."

"I—I—I—I—I——"

Dinah stepped out from the dark corner of the building and began his explanation.

"Wait a minute," begged Sody. "Let's get farther away from Breed."

They went farther down the street and stopped in a dark spot.

"Didja jist want to bust that mirror?" asked Sody. "Don't talk, Dinah; nod or shake."

Dinah shook.

"Accidental?"

Dinah shook again.

"Uh-huh," reflected Sody. "That's funny."

"Say, didja see somebody in the mirror?"

Dinah nodded violently.

"Who?" asked Sody.

"Sh—sh—sh—sh—sh——"

"Stop it!" snapped Sody. "Was it Short-Horn Adams?"

Dinah nodded quickly.

"Well, that's settled," said Sody. "Now what do we do?"

"I'm goin' home," said Bud. "I've got a home and a wife, yuh must remember."

"If I was in yore condition, I'd not thank anybody to remind me of it," said Sody seriously. "You might as well stay and make a good night of it, Bud."

"I'll be sober by the time I get home, Sody."

"Yeah—by the time yuh git home. You'll prob'ly fall off yore horse before yuh get there."

"No, I won't either. You and Dinah better go home, too. If yuh stay around here, Breed'll have yuh both in jail."

"You better stay," insisted Sody. "You'll get a lot of good laughs out of watchin' him try it."

But Bud had made up his mind to go home; so Dinah and Sody parted reluctantly with him and went seeking more fun, while Bud mounted and rode swiftly out of Modoc.

IT WAS five miles from town to Bud's ranch, but before he had gone half the distance he realized that he contained far too much whisky. Solitude and the swinging motion of his horse caused him to realize also that he was in no condition to converse with his wife.

"It can't last always," he told himself; "so I'll swing into the hills and ride it off."

There was a full moon, which lighted the hills, and a cool breeze that fanned his fevered brow; but instead of sobering up, he grew even more intoxicated. In a half-daze, he circled through the hills and came in at the rear of the ranch.

He could see a dim light in the living-room, and he knew that May was waiting up for him. He felt sorry for her. He had promised her many things which she had been denied. Now he was worse than broke. He remembered dimly that Breed was not going to try to find the stolen cattle, and that Lavelle had refused to help him again. It seemed like weeks ago that he had talked with them. He dismounted and dropped the reins, forgetting to unsaddle his horse.

"To —— with 'em!" he told himself thickly. "I'll git along. Tha's jist what I'll do—git along, y'betcha."

He approached the house from the rear, laughing foolishly at his erratic progress. At the kitchen door he stopped. The door was open. A foolish idea took root in his addled brain. He would take off his boots and sneak in. The idea appealed to him immensely.

So he sat down on the step and drew off his boots, chuckling to himself. Somewhere he had heard of a drunken man doing that same thing. It didn't seem so funny then, but it did now. Perhaps, he thought, May might be asleep—and never know that he did not come home sober.

He tucked a boot under each arm and crept inside. He could see the light in the living-room. It was an oil-lamp, turned low. Into the living-room he went and stopped near the table. The front door, which led out on to a porch, was open, and he heard voices. They were talking softly.

Bud frowned and listened closely, but could not hear plainly enough; so he moved over closer to the door. It was a man's voice and a woman's. He could hear them plain enough now. The man's voice was very distinct:

"Oh, I know—loyalty and all that. But you've tried it two years. And what have you got? Nothing. Why, this ranch wouldn't bring the price of two dresses—the kind you ought to have."

Bud blinked wonderingly, straining his ears for the woman's reply, which was pitched too low for him to hear what she said. He looked around the room, as if wondering if he had entered the wrong house by mistake. Then the man's voice again:

"Look at it right. You are young yet: the prettiest woman in this county. Do you want to throw away your youth? Do you want to look like the rest of these cattlemen's wives in a few years, or do you want to live in luxury, retain your beauty?

"Bud Daley can never hope to give you much. I will admit that Bud is doing the best he can, but it isn't enough. As a cattleman, he is a failure; and you two can't live on a cowpuncher's salary. Just now," the man laughed, "he is down in Modoc filling his skin with whisky—leaving you here alone."

If the woman made any reply, Bud was unable to hear it. He was sober now. The whisky had evaporated from his brain. He looked down at his bedraggled socks and at the boots under his arms. He lifted his eyes and stared toward the door, as the man's voice continued:

"I remember when you came here to Modoc. I knew then that you were the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I pictured you in silks and furs, May. Since then you have been in my dreams, day-dreams and night-dreams. You are not happy. No, you are not. Can you look me in the eyes and tell me that you are satisfied with life? No, I didn't think you could.

"May, you can't afford to throw away your life. Bud is man enough to understand — and if he doesn't—well, what matter?"

Bud's face had gone gray in the yellow light of the lamp, and the lines of his face deepened, as he stared across the room into space. His mouth was so dry that it was painful, and his eyes ached from the intensity of looking far into the future.

They were talking again, but he did not listen. The world had gone flat, stale. He wondered dimly if May had a wrap around her shoulders. It was cool out there on the porch. He felt cold.

Then he found himself back at his horse and started to mount before he realized that he still carried his boots. They were hard to get on, and he wondered why he had ever taken them off. It was a foolish thing to do, he thought.

He mounted his horse and looked slowly around.

"Where am I goin'?" he asked himself, half-aloud. "I'm ready to go, and there ain't no place."

Somewhere a cow bawled sleepily.

"Wish I was a cow," said Bud wearily. "Cows don't think."

On all sides stretched the moonlit hills, silver, blue and haze that hid their harsh outlines—a sparkling fairyland, topped with a ceiling of stars. Bud turned and rode out of the rear gate, heading into the hills; riding away from humanity, seeking the open places to clear his brain.

On the slope of the hill he drew rein and looked back toward the ranch-house, where the oil lamp gleamed, a dull pin-point of yellow light. It seemed that he could still hear the drone of voices on the front porch; but it was only the whispering of the breeze through the purple sage.

"Lavelle, I reckon yo're right," he said softly. "Bud Daley can't ever hope to give her much. And she can't afford to throw away her life—look like the rest of the cattlemen's wives. I—I never thought about it thataway, Lavelle."

Bud sighed deeply and the fumes of the forgotten whisky tasted sour to his palate.

"Gawd," he said softly, "you made a wonderful world, but, if I'm any judge, the makin' of humanity wasn't no job for one man."

Then he bowed his head and rode straight into the hills.

* * *

AFTER Bud had left them, Sody and Dinah proceeded to keep out of Dug Breed's way and to drink much liquor. Dinah promised Sody that he would bury the hatchet as far as Short-Horn Adams was concerned and hold nothing but good thoughts for everybody.

And so passed several pleasant hours in the lives of Dinah and Sody. The wooden sidewalks became far too narrow for their tread and the buildings, at times, surged and jerked violently. Then, without any warning, Dinah's cup of joy turned sour, and he choked with a great emotion. In fact, he wept brokenly. Sody tried to cheer him, without avail. Then a great sadness came down upon Sody, and he cried too.

It is very likely that the tears blinded them to such an extent that they separated. No one will ever know whether Sody lost Dinah or Dinah lost Sody. Anyway, as soon as he partly recovered from his crying spree, Sody went hunting for his little partner.

But in all that vast army of gyrating houses, lamps, cowboys, he was unable to find the object of his search. From saloon to saloon he went, but there was no sign of Dinah Blewette. Then Sody decided that Dinah had gone home; so he went to the hitch-rack, intending to see if Dinah's horse was still there.

It was—and so was Dinah. He was sitting on the ground, with his back up against a post, and Sody did not see him until he stepped on his leg.

"Yuh-yuh-yuh——" began Dinah indignantly.

"Oh, there yuh are, eh?" said Sody.

Sody lighted a match and looked Dinah over. His eyes were swollen and purple, his nose slightly out of line and he appeared to be minus several front teeth. Taking him all in all, Dinah was a greatly changed man.

"Yuh found Short-Horn, didn't yuh," commented Sody. "Don't try to answer me, Dinah. Every inch of yuh proclaims the fact that you cried yore way into his heart. My ——, but yo're a mess!"

He helped Dinah to his feet and backed him against the post, while he tried to wipe Dinah's face with a handkerchief, which only increased the misery of the little cowpuncher.

"Don't try to tell me what to do," growled Sody. "Yore face has got to be set right, or it'll look awful queer. You ain't got no sense, Dinah. Short-Horn is big enough to tie yuh in a knot and hang yuh up to dry."

"He-he dud-did," said Dinah sadly.

"Uh-huh." Sody made a last swipe at Dinah's face with the handkerchief and hitched up his own belt.

"Well, we'll have speech with Mister Short-Horn, Dinah. He's a powerful mean critter, the same of which I ain't too drunk to remember; so I goes cautious-like. I ain't takin' yore troubles upon me, yuh understand. Yore battles are yore battles, Dinah; but jist now I feels antagonistic agin' him and all his ilk.

"Know what 'ilk' means, Dinah? Don't answer me. My ——, I do like these one-sided conversations. C'mon."

Sody hitched up his belt, squared around to get his bearings and headed for the Rest Ye All, with Dinah weaving along in his wake. For all of his huge bulk, Sody was as hard as nails; but he was cognizant of the fact that he was just a little too drunk to do a good job of fighting with his hands.

The Rest Ye All was well filled with cowboys, who were spending their round-up stakes as fast as possible. The long bar was crowded to capacity, and the gambling-hall, at the rear, was blue with tobacco smoke and shifting forms. Sody shouldered his way past the bar, with Dinah following along in his wake, taking advantage of Sody's bulk to clear a trail for him.

Dug Breed was coming out into the bar-room, elbowing his way along; but when he saw Sody and Dinah he turned around and forced his way back. Breed had heard that Short-Horn Adams had whipped Dinah Blewette, and he knew that the trail of these two JM cowpunchers would probably lead to trouble.

And not only that, but Breed held no forgiveness in his heart for what Sody had done to him earlier in the evening; and he was all primed to tap Sody over the head with a gun and take him to jail.

Short-Horn Adams was bucking a roulette wheel at the extreme end of the room and was having no luck whatever. Short-Horn's voice was plainly audible as he complained over his ill-luck. Other punchers laughed, shouted with rough glee and placed their bets.

A dapper little gambler was running the game, his derby hat cocked at a rakish angle on his head, a cigar held jauntily between his teeth. Short-Horn glared beligerently at him, as the gambler raked in Short-Horn's last bets.

"The house is lucky tonight, gents," he laughed. "Put down your contributions and accept our sympathy."

"Yeah, yo're sure lucky," agreed Short-Horn. "I betcha I know what makes yuh lucky."

With a sweep of his hand, Short-Horn removed the hat from the gambler's head and placed it on his own. Short-Horn's head was a trifle too small and the derby fitted down over his brows.

"Now spin yore wheel," roared Short-Horn. "C'mon, gents. I've removed the curse from our midst, and we c'n break the danged game in three whirls."

Whap!

Sody's broad palm descended upon the derby with great force and drove it down over Short-Horn's head, covering his face and wedging it down over his ears. Short-Horn whirled around clawing at the brim of the hat, but only succeeding in ripping the brim away.

"Now yuh got him, Dinah," said Sody calmly. "He's yore size now, li'l' feller. Help yoreself to the mustard."

And Dinah did not need a second invitation. With both fists he hammered the blinded Short-Horn unmercifully, while the crowd cheered wildly and gave him plenty of room. Many of them knew that Short-Horn had beaten Dinah, and they wanted to see the smaller man even the score, even if he was doing it unfairly.

While Short-Horn clawed at the hat-brim, which stuck tightly, Dinah socked him with both fists, driving him back into the roulette layout. And then, through the cheering crowd, came Dug Breed, shoving his way to the center, only to be met by Sody Slavin.

"Stop it!" yelped Breed, "I'll arrest every——"

But his threat was unfinished, when Sody bumped into him, crashing him back into the crowd. At this moment, Short-Horn managed to get the hat loose, and charged Dinah, who ducked down and let Short-Horn fall over him.

"Rattle yore hocks, Dinah!" yelled Sody. "The sheriff is angry with us. C'mon!"

Sody dived straight at the crowd, with Dinah wobbling after him, and the crowd surged in behind them, blocking the sheriff and the cruising Short-Horn, who had a gun in his hand and murder in his eye.

Straight out past the bar went Sody and Dinah, heading for their horses, which were up the street at the nearest hitch-rack. Sody knew that it would be dangerous for them to stay in Modoc. It would mean a gun-battle with Short-Horn and his gang—if the sheriff did not get them first.

They had swung on to their horses and spurred into the street when they heard the unmistakable thud of a revolver shot, fired from inside a building. Sody's horse lurched sidewise and went to its knees, while Sody flung himself free, bounced to his feet and ran to Dinah, who was having trouble with his animal.

Up behind Dinah's saddle climbed the big cowpuncher, while Dinah's horse, unused to a double-load, bawled wildly, threw down its head and bucked out of town, heading for the home ranch.

But the bucking was of short duration, because of the fact that Sody's weight was too much for the broncho to handle; but they faded out of Modoc's sight so fast that only a wisp of dust blew back to show of their leaving.

DUG BREED clawed his way to the street about the time that they faded out. Several others arrived about this time, their interest centered on Sody's horse, which sprawled in the middle of the street. The fact that some one had fired several pistol shots did not alarm them in the least.

"I heard three shots fired," volunteered a cowpuncher. "I was comin' up the street and I see this horse go down. I think the first shot hit the horse, but I dunno where they was fired from."

Dug Breed said nothing. The horse was quite dead; so they unsaddled it, and two cowboys, using their ropes, hooked on to it from their saddle-horns and dragged the carcass off the street.

Breed knew that the shots had not been fired by Short-Horn nor by any one in the Rest Ye All; and he wondered who else had a grievance against Sody Slavin.

Across the street was a general merchandise store, post-office, restaurant and the Modoc bank. The restaurant was the only one of the four that was open at this time of night. Farther up that side of the street were more saloons, but the shots could hardly have been fired from there.

Beside the Rest Ye All saloon was a big feed store, on one side, and on the other was another general merchandise store, both closed. Breed found the cowboy who had heard the shots and questioned him.

"I dunno much about it," confessed the cowboy, "but they did seem to come from the other side, and they was kinda muffled, like they was from inside a house. I heard one shot, and then I seen the horse fall down. I was kinda interested in that, but I sure heard two more shots."

Breed crossed the street and walked past the restaurant. There were several diners within, busily engaged with their food. He walked past the store, which was unlighted, the door locked. The post office was locked, blinds drawn.

But in front of the Modoc bank he stopped. There was glass on the sidewalk, which had fallen from one of the front windows. A closer examination showed that almost the entire pane was missing.

"Did somebody shoot from inside the bank?" wondered Breed as he peered in through the broken window.

He broke away some of the jagged glass and prepared to climb within, but changed his mind. It might look bad, he thought.

It was only a short distance to the home of Frank Jordan, president of the bank, and Breed negotiated it in short order.

Jordan was asleep, but Breed beat a tattoo on the door with the muzzle of his gun and soon aroused him.

"This is the sheriff," informed Breed. "One of the front windows of the bank has been smashed out."

"Smashed out?" Jordan grew very wide awake. "Who smashed it?"

"——, I dunno!" snapped Breed. "Hop into yore pants and let's find out. And don't forget yore key."

Jordan appeared in a few minutes, and they hurried down to the bank. Breed told him nothing about the shots nor of the dead saddle-horse, but Jordan volunteered the information that George Findlay, the cashier, intended to work late that evening.

"Did he have anythin' agin' Sody Slavin?" asked Breed.

"Slavin? That big cowboy? Why, I—I really can't say, sheriff. Not that I know of. In fact, I doubt that George knows him."

Jordan grunted wonderingly at the broken window and opened the door. The bank was lighted with oil-lamps, which it took several moments to find in the dark. The vault door was wide open, as was the inner door.

Jordan gawped wildly around, while Breed walked to the vault door and peered inside.

"Look over there!" exclaimed Jordan, pointing back toward the door.

Just to the left of the door, directly below the smashed window, was the huddled body of the bank cashier. Breed went swiftly to him, turning his face up to the light.

"Is he dead?" asked Jordan hoarsely.

"Yeah." Breed squinted at the window and back at the dead cashier.

"He's been hit over the head," said Breed. "Mebbe that didn't stop him; so they used lead on the poor ——. Better take a look at the vault, Jordan."

They left the body lying there and went to the vault, carrying a lamp. Swiftly the banker examined the place, but shook his head wearily.

"I can't tell how much, if anything, is missing, sheriff. It will take a complete check to tell. I am afraid that the Modoc bank is hit hard."

He stooped and picked up several loose bills which had been dropped on the floor. The sheriff picked up several silver dollars, and among them was a silver piece, which was not a dollar. He looked closely at it.

"What is it, sheriff?" asked the banker.

"A rosette," said Breed thoughtfully.

"A rosette?"

"Yeah. One of them ornaments that punchers wear on the side of their chaps. I'll keep this, 'cause it might come in handy."

They went back into the room, and the banker closed the vault, while Breed studied the case. There was a spot of blood on the floor near the vault door. The cashier was wearing a coat. Just to the right of the front door, the sheriff picked up a black hat.

"That's George's hat," said the banker.

"They probably laid for him," said Breed. "When he came out the door they herded him back in here, made him open the vault and then sapped him over the head. They probably thought he was hit hard enough to make him lay still; but he recovered and tried to make a getaway. They missed him with one shot and smashed the window. That bullet killed Sody Slavin's horse. The other two got George. You stay here while I get the coroner, Jordan."

"Have you any idea who did it?" asked Jordan.

"If I have, I ain't yellin' it," said Breed, and slammed the door behind him.

He felt of the hammered silver rosette as he hurried along, and the feel of it brought a grin to his lips.

IT WAS after nine o'clock the following morning, when Bud Daley rode up to his stable. All night long he had ridden the hills, and his horse stumbled wearily to a standstill, its head hanging.

And Bud was just as weary as the horse. His face was gray and drawn from his mental battle, but his lips were drawn tightly in a stern resolution to put the case squarely up to his wife. He felt that he would know in a moment just how she felt about it.

She came out through the kitchen door as he dismounted, shading her eyes from the sun, and walked slowly toward him, while he yanked the saddle from his horse.

Another rider was coming in toward the ranch, and Mrs. Daley turned to look at him. It was Dug Breed, the sheriff. He raised his hat to Mrs. Daley and dismounted beside her, as Bud came up to them.

"Hello, Dug," said Bud wearily.

He felt that Breed was out there because of what happened the night before, and grinned slightly, as he remembered that he had knocked the table away from the sheriff.

"Mornin', Bud," said Breed softly. "Been ridin'?"

Bud looked at his wife. Her general appearance indicated that she had spent a sleepless night. Breed looked at Bud's horse, which was rolling in the dust beside the corral. It was easy to see that the horse had traveled many miles during the night.

"Yeah," Bud nodded slowly. "I've been ridin'. Why?"

"Where yuh been ridin' to, Bud?"

"What's that to you, Dug?"

"Mebby a lot—mebby a little, Bud. Can yuh prove where you've been ridin'?"

Bud shifted uneasily and his eyes hardened.

"Where was you about midnight, Bud?" asked Breed.

"None of your —— business!"

Bud's body tensed angrily and his right hand dropped to his side. Mrs. Daley looked from one to the other quickly and started to put her hand on Bud's arm, but he stepped aside.

"I ain't goin' to quarrel with yuh, Bud," said Breed slowly. "You don't have to tell me where you've been, if yuh don't want to. But, under the circumstances, I've got to arrest yuh for the murder of George Findlay and for robbin' the Modoc bank."

Bud's right hand came up slowly and the back of it brushed across his eyes. He scowled thoughtfully, but a grin crossed his lips.

"You jokin' me, Dug?" he asked hoarsely.

"Wish I was, Bud. You'll come peaceful-like, won't yuh?"

"I'm under arrest?"

"Yeah, yuh sure are, Bud. I hate——"

"What do you know about hate?" Bud's voice was flat, toneless.

He looked at his wife. Her eyes were wide with fright and her face looked pale and drawn.

"Bud," she whispered, "you—you didn't do this. Why, you couldn't have done a thing like that, Bud."

Bud looked at her thoughtfully. Then he shook his head, and a wistful smile passed his lips as he said:

"May, yuh never can tell what a human bein' will do. I've kinda lost faith in folks."

"But you can prove that you didn't do it, can't you, Bud?"

"No-o-o," Bud shook his head. "I don't reckon I can, and I don't know anybody that can prove it for me."

Breed turned to Mrs. Daley.

"Wasn't Bud home last night?"

"You don't need to answer that, May," said Bud quickly.

"No, she don't have to," admitted Breed.

"But why do yuh blame me for it, Dug?" asked Bud. "You ain't told me a thing, except that I'm guilty."

Breed stepped in closer to Bud, examining the sides of his leather chaps, while Bud watched him curiously. Then Breed pointed to a spot about midway of Bud's right leg.

"Where's the rosette gone, Bud?"

"The rosette?"

Bud frowned and looked closely. On the left leg there were five silver rosettes; on the right there were only four. They were of a peculiar design, hand-hammered from silver. Bud had made them from Mexican silver and had stamped the designs with a leather stamping tool.

"I must 'a' lost it," muttered Bud.

"I found it on the vault floor," said Breed slowly, watching Bud's face. "There was some scattered money, too. Findlay was over by the front window—dead."

"On the vault floor?" muttered Bud vacantly. "That's funny."

He examined the leg of his chaps closely. The piece of whang-leather, which looped through the rosette, had worn through.

"Yeah—on the vault floor," said Breed.

"Oh, Bud!" breathed his wife. "You didn't do this. Say that you didn't do it, Bud."

Bud sighed and shook his head.

"What's the use, May? I reckon it don't make much difference, anyway."

He held his hands out to Breed, a wistful smile on his lips.

"Better put 'em on, Dug, yuh never can tell about me—or any other human bein'."

Breed snapped the handcuffs on Bud's wrists, took Bud's gun and shoved it inside his own waist-band.

"You'll have to saddle my horse for me, Dug," he grinned.

"All right," Breed sighed with relief.

He was glad to have taken Bud Daley without trouble. Bud followed him down to the horse, but Mrs. Daley turned and went back to the house, a dejected little figure, and leaned against the kitchen door wearily, while Bud and the sheriff rode away.

Bud did not look back.

"Mebbe it's better this way," he told himself, "I don't care a dang what happens from now on."

There was no demonstration in Modoc when the sheriff came in with his prisoner. Bud was well liked by the cattle men. Jordan had made an investigation of the robbery and found that the Modoc bank was about twenty thousand dollars loser.

Jordan lost no time in interviewing Bud in the jail. Even if Bud was convicted, the fact still remained that the Modoc bank was still twenty thousand dollars short—which was a lot of money.

Jordan intimated that the return of the money would react in Bud's favor; but Bud only grinned at him and reminded him that murder was murder and had nothing whatever to do with money.

"And besides," reminded Bud, "if I was able to hand yuh back that money, it would only cinch the murder on to me. Whoever got that money killed Findlay."

Then came Uncle Jimmy Miller, like a raging bob-cat. He swore and raved about what he was going to do, while Bud grinned and smoked his cigarets. Then he cooled down and told Bud that one of Bud's shots had killed Sody Slavin's horse. The fact that Uncle Jimmy was sure that Bud had done the job made no difference.

"I'll back yuh for the last —— cent I've got," he declared. "Never did have no use for banks, by ——! Wanted to borry some money about a year ago from Jordan. Wanted ten p'cent.! Wanted me to give him a mortgage on the JM. Dang him, he wanted the world with a fence around it. Jist the same as told me that m' word wasn't no good. I'll betcha he'll be dunnin' yuh for ten p'cent., if they convicts yuh, Bud."

"They'll likely hang me, if they find me guilty," grinned Bud.

"Like —— they will! Let 'em try it. By ——, I'll organize a gang of m' own and take this town apart. Oh, I ain't too old to act right smart at times, Bud. I used t' be a hellion in m' time, and Dug Breed won't be the first sheriff that I've called upon to hunt a new stompin'-ground. And some of 'em has sure hummed like a spike gettin' away, too."

Bud laughed and shook his head.

"Better let things go as they lay, Uncle Jimmy."

"Uh-huh." Thoughtfully. "What about May? How'd she take it?"

"Oh, all right, I reckon."

Uncle Jimmy considered Bud closely.

"You and May ain't antagonistic toward each other, are yuh?"

"No-o-o."

"Yes, yuh are. Now, you jist set easy, Bud; I'll take care of May."

Bud shook his head and stared at the ashes of his cigaret.

"Better let her alone, Uncle Jimmy."

"Thasso? You go to ——, will yuh?" Uncle Jimmy got to his feet and backed to the barred door. "You see if I let her alone, young feller. Ain't either one of yuh got any sense. Now you set down on the seat of yore pants, 'cause you ain't goin' nowhere."

Dug Breed unlocked the door and Uncle Jimmy went swearing back to the street.

Sody and Dinah came cautiously back to town, but every one seemed to have forgotten the incidents of the night before. Uncle Jimmy told them about the arrest, and Sody swore wonderingly at the fact that it was one of Bud's misdirected shots that killed his horse.

"Gug-gosh!" blurted Dinah in amazement.

"Now that's about all from you," warned Sody. "This ain't a case that requires a lot of conversation, Dinah. How much money did Bud get, Uncle Jimmy?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"The ol' son of a gun!" applauded Sody. "Bud ain't no piker, is he? Whooee-e-e! Twenty thousand!"

"But he's in jail for murder," reminded Uncle Jimmy.

"I know, but—gosh, that's a lot of money. He likely planted it in a safe place, too."

"You kinda amaze me, Sody," said Uncle Jimmy sadly. "Don'tcha know yo're applaudin' a murderer? My ——, ain'tcha got no respect for the law?"

"Since when did you git so danged sanitary?" demanded Sody.

"I've allus respected the law, Sody." Softly and sadly.

"You have, like ——!"

"I have respect for the law, Sody."

"Yeah, sur yuh have. You respect a kickin' bronc, too. You don't monkey with the business end of the —— thing; you get ahead of it."

"He-he-he-he," chuckled Dinah.

"Sure he does," interrupted Sody. "We know him. He gits ahead of the law—where the thing can't kick him. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"A prophet is without honor in his own home town," said Uncle Jimmy sadly, shaking his head.

"Profit!" snorted Sody. "Yo're a dead loss, Jim Miller. Let's go and git a drink."

"If I was in m' right mind, I'd fire you, Sody," declared Uncle Jimmy.

"If you wait for that, I've got a life job," grinned Sody.

They went into the Rest Ye All and stopped at the bar. Several men were there, and among them was Cleve Lavelle. He nodded absently and continued to converse with the others. Naturally the robbery and murder was the topic of conversation.

"I dunno how Bud Daley is goin' to even hire a lawyer," said one of the men. "He's flat broke, I hear."

"I'll be —— if he is!" snorted Uncle Jimmy, "the JM ranch is behind him, with every horn and hide I've got."

"You don't think he's guilty, Miller?" asked Lavelle.

"What the —— difference does that make?"

"All right," nodded Lavelle. "I'll go fifty-fifty with you on the deal."

"You mean that you'll help him, too, Lavelle?"

"Just that," said Lavelle firmly. "As far as Daley is personally concerned, I'm not interested; but we've got to remember that he's got a wife. Things like this hurt a woman, boys. Whether he's guilty or not, we've got to try and save him. He owes me a lot of money, which I never expect to collect. He got sore because I would not lend him another ten thousand."

"Then he needed money, eh?" queried one of the men.

"I suppose I shouldn't have mentioned that," said Lavelle. "He must have needed it, or he wouldn't have tried to borrow. Yes, he claimed that some one had stolen all his cattle."

"They did," said Uncle Jimmy. "Bud won't lie."

"All right," laughed Lavelle. "Let's have a drink."

II

THE smoking-car creaked and groaned as the train swung slowly around one of the many sharp curves in the Modoc country. From the engine came the shrill whistle, sounding eerie and far away; from the wheels came the *clickety-click, clickety-click*, caused by the rail-joints.

There were only two men in the smoker—"Hashknife" Hartley and "Sleepy" Stevens. Hashknife sprawled his six-feet-plus in solid comfort, hunched down so low that his coat hiked up around his ears and the lower part of his lean face was hidden inside the unbuttoned collar.

Sleepy was also at ease, although he did not have as much length to distribute. His booted feet were heel-hooked against the cushion of the opposite seat, his nose slightly flattened against the window as he stared out into the darkness.

Both men were dressed in range fashion. On the seat in front of them rested a couple of cheap telescope valises, not at all bulged. In fact, the sides were just a trifle sunken, which would indicate that these two sons of the range were traveling light.

Hashknife's right hand fumbled in the pocket of his faded vest and drew out a conglomeration of matches, cigaret papers, a revolver cartridge and a piece of string. He selected a paper, carefully replaced the other impedimenta and glanced sidewise at Sleepy.

"Gimme yore Durham."

Sleepy's nose squeaked on the glass, as he turned his head.

"Why dontcha buy yuh some Durham once in a while?"

Hashknife looked with disapproval upon his partner.

"You ain't refusin' me yore Durham, are yuh, cowboy?"

Sleepy grunted complainingly, dug into a hip-pocket and drew out a sack of the required brand.

"Yo're always stingy," observed Hashknife, helping himself from the inverted sack, and spilling a goodly quantity into the wrinkles of his shirt. "I always give you tobacco, don't I? Answer me that, why don't yuh? Any old time I have tobacco——"

"Any old time yuh do!" snorted Sleepy, accepting the sack and shoving it deep in his pocket.

Hashknife scratched a match and settled down to solid comfort again. Sleepy humped over, searching under the seat for a much-thumbed time-table, which he perused dilligently for a while.

"The —— fool that got up this here time-table must 'a' knowed what he meant; but I don't," he declared. "It says here for yuh to read up. Read up, ——! It ain't no ways——"

"He means for yuh to read up the page. informed Hashknife.

"Didja think I thought he meant for me

to read up the side of my boot? I know what he meant."

"Didja? When do we hit Modoc?"

Sleepy perused the page again.

"Up or down?" he asked.

"Which way are we goin'?"

"That's why I complains," explained Sleepy, throwing the offending folder on the floor. "Nobody knows, except the *hombre* that wrote it—and he prob'ly didn't want to go to Modoc."

"Probably not," agreed Hashknife. "I'll betcha that Modoc don't care what he thought, though."

"I s'pose not." Thus Sleepy wearily. "Mebbe Bud Daley won't be a —— bit glad to see us."

"Yeah, he will," said Hashknife. "Old Bud's a good feller."

"Was," corrected Sleepy. "You ain't heard from him lately.

"Year ago last Christmas."

"And this is September. Danged near two years."

"That's right. Time sure does gallop along."

"And it wasn't nothin' but a Christmas card he sent yuh."

"That's all," Hashknife yawned widely and threw away his cigaret. "But it said he'd like to have us stop and see him some time, Sleepy—him and May."

"He had to be polite," grinned Sleepy. "I wonder if May is as pretty as she used to be? My golly, she sure was a dinger."

"Wouldn't change much in two years, or so. Yessir, she sure was pretty, Sleepy. I've seen a lot of girls, but I'll betcha that May Daley is the prettiest. She was too pretty to be safe and sound."

"M-m-m-m. I s'pose that Bud and her are gettin' along like old married folks. He probab'ly puts on his slippers at night, don't play no poker, has to sneak a drink and then eat cloves. Smokes a pipe out in the woodshed and never says ——, except when he refers to a irrigation project.

"How did he ever happen to go to this Modoc country, Hashknife? Didn't her folks live up here, or how was it?"

"I dunno about her folks, Sleepy. Bud met the owner of a cowranch up here and he offers Bud a good job, I reckon. That's the way it was told to me. Bud never said how it comes. Anyway, it don't make me no never mind. As long as we're passin' Modoc, I thought we might as well stop off to see him."

"Sure; I'd like to see old Bud. He used to be a forked sort of a puncher. Didja ever hear anythin' about this Modoc range?"

Hashknife shook his head.

"Nope. It's a big range, I reckon. There's a lot of cows shipped out of here. Remember them two painted broncs that Red Ellers had at Skyline? They was branded with the Bow-Knot. Red called 'em the 'Necktie' broncs. Them two was from Modoc. Red spoke about the range once in a while, but I don't remember much of his talk."

They were silent for quite a while as the train lurched along through the hills. Then:

"Hashknife, I wonder if me and you will ever settle down?"

"I dunno." Hashknife smiled softly and rubbed his chin against the collar of his shirt. "I s'pose so, Sleepy. I'm gettin' kinda tired of rammin' around the country, hornin' into other folks' business. Sometimes I wish I had a home, cowboy."

"Mebbe we'll hit a good range some day; a range where we'll want to settle down and take life easy. The years roll along, Sleepy. A buckin' bronc kinda makes me weary, and I'm gettin' slow with a gun. We're bound to slow up, don'tcha know it? We try to kid ourselves into thinkin' that we're just as fast as we was a few years ago, but age sneaks along and takes the snap out of us. Pretty soon me and you will buck up agin' a tough deal and we'll find that we're jist a fraction of a second slow."

Sleepy looked at Hashknife and laughed.

"All right, Methusalem; yo're about ready for the bone-yard."

Hashknife grinned and stretched in a wide yawn.

"All right. Anyway, I'm growin' timid in my old age. Here comes the brakeman, lightin' his way with a lantern that don't give no light."

The brakeman came up the swaying aisle, grasping the backs of the seats, and when almost to the two men, he opened his mouth and yelled—

"Moo-o-doc!"

Hashknife and Sleepy uncoupled quickly and grasped their valises. Came a long-drawn wail from the locomotive, and the *clickety-clicks* sounded at longer intervals, as the brake-shoes gripped softly on to the wheels and slowly brought the train to a stop.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy were halfway to the doorway, when the train stopped, with Hashknife in the lead. Suddenly he stopped and Sleepy bumped into him. For a moment Hashknife held firm, then turned quickly and shoved Sleepy out of the aisle and into a seat.

It was all done so quickly that Sleepy had no time to protest, and found himself sitting down, with Hashknife beside him, while through the doorway came two men. Sleepy blinked. One of the men was Bud Daley, the man they were going to stop at Modoc to see, and he was linked by a handcuff to the other man.

Then the train started on. The two men sat down a few seats ahead and across the isle from Hashknife and Sleepy, without paying any attention to them. The two cowboys looked at each other, as if seeking an answer to the question that was uppermost in their minds. Bud Daley had not seen them. Just now he sat on the inside, looking straight ahead, saying nothing.

The other man turned his head and looked at Hashknife and Sleepy. He was a man of about forty years of age, hard-faced, keen of eye and rather cruel of mouth. He merely glanced at them and turned back.

"Whatcha know about that?" whispered Sleepy.

"Bud has done had the deadwood put upon him, it seems."

The train gained speed again. It was evident that there were many curvings of the railroad on this side of Modoc, as the old coach protested against the contractions; while the engineer shrilled an almost constant warning.

They were possibly two miles out of Modoc when the train seemed to shudder its whole length as the brakes were applied heavily. The windows rattled and the doors banged loudly, while the whistle shrilled in short blasts. Then the train ground to a lurching stop.

The man to whom Daley was linked leaned across and peered out of the window. Sleepy flattened his face against the window and tried to see something, but there was nothing but the dark.

"Prob'ly hit a cow," said Hashknife. "They sure can flag a train. I remember——"

Hashknife stopped and turned his head. Some one was coming down the aisle from the rear of the train. And that someone was two masked men, very business-like with their six-shooters.

"Don't move, gents!"

The one in the lead spoke sharply. Bud Daley jerked around, as did the man with him.

"Just take things easy," he cautioned. "That's what we're aimin' to do."

He walked past Hashknife and Sleepy, past Daley and the other man and turned, while his companion stayed farther back, guarding from the rear.

The man at the front took off his hat, disclosing the fact that the mask covered his entire head.

"Now," he said, "we will take up the collection. Just ante what you've got and don't hold out on the handsome gent. Remember that the man behind yuh is lookin' on, and don't start nothin'."

He held out his hat, and for the first time he seemed to notice that the two men were linked together.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "What have we here, folks? This must be the sheriff, takin' a prisoner to the big corral. Bet there ain't enough money on the two of yuh to buy a breakfast for a hummin'-bird. Huh!

"Probably against the law, but I'm goin' to ask the officer to turn his man loose. Officer, have yuh got the key for that padlock?"

The officer squinted closely at him and was about to shake his head, when the bandit continued:

"Go ahead and lie, if yuh want to; you'll have to produce the key, just the same."

"All right," grunted the officer, taking the key from his pocket. "You've got the drop."

He snapped the hand-cuff loose. The bandit motioned for Bud Daley to get up, which he lost no time in doing.

"Beat it," said the bandit. "I've done all I can for yuh."

Swiftly Daley went to the door and swung off into the darkness. The bandit laughed, stepped past the officer and faced Hashknife and Sleepy, holding out his hat.

"Pardner," grinned Hashknife, "you've sure picked a blank. We've got what's left

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of a pair of tickets, an appetite and nowhere in particular to go."

"Yeah?" The bandit glanced sidewise at the officer, who was sitting rigidly in his seat.

"Broke, eh?" he asked.

"Bent all to thunder," nodded Hashknife.

Swiftly the bandit reached into his pocket and drew out a handful of silver, which he tossed to Hashknife.

"Breakfast stake, gents," he laughed. "Sit just like yuh are and everybody will have a pleasant evenin'."

"Much obliged," said Hashknife, "and we're holdin' firm."

Swiftly the two bandits backed out of the car, shutting the door behind them. Then the officer sprang to his feet, drew a gun and ran toward the rear door; but there was no sign of the two bandits.

He came back cursing his luck, and went to the front door. From outside, farther up the train, came a fusillade of shots. The officer stepped out on the platform, but did not leave the car.

"What do yuh make of it, Hashknife?" queried Sleepy.

"I dunno, cowboy. Let's investigate."

They found the officer on the steps, leaning out, looking toward the front of the train. There was nothing to be seen. Then a man came running back, carrying a lantern. It was the brakeman.

"They're gone!" he yelled, as he came up to them. "Robbed every car, cut loose the express car and engine and took 'em away. Did they come into this car?"

"By ——, they sure did!" snorted the officer. "They took my prisoner away from me."

"Uh-huh," nodded the brakeman, too excited to even care who the prisoner might be. "They've done a good job of it, I guess. I've got to flag the rear, or some darned freight will come along and ruin us."

He trotted away up the track, his lantern bobbing in the dark.

"Got any idea who pulled the job?" asked Hashknife.

"No!" The officer was sore.

"You're the sheriff, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah."

"Waitin' for 'em to come back?"

"Waitin' for who to come back?"

"The hold-up men," said Hashknife innocently.

The sheriff grunted an unprintable word and dropped off the platform.

"Now yuh went and made him sore," complained Sleepy. "And he'll go away and leave us here alone. You don't show no judgment a-tall, Hashknife."

The sheriff heard it, but did not turn his head. The conductor came on to the platform and flashed his lantern into them.

"Did they collect back here, too?" he asked.

"They had it in mind," grinned Hashknife. "But it wasn't in the cards. What did they do—swipe the express car?"

"They sure did," said the conductor. "There must have been a bunch of 'em, because they worked all the cars at the same time. Some of the bunch took the engine and express car, but the rest of them had their horses handy and pulled out as soon as they had cleaned out the train. It sure was a neat job."

"Yeah, they knowed how to do it," said Hashknife. "How far are we from Modoc?"

"About two miles." The conductor swung his lantern outward.

"Who is that out there?" he asked.

"That's the sheriff," explained Hashknife. "He's lookin' for 'em to come back."

The sheriff turned and climbed back onto the platform, where he glared at Hashknife and turned to the conductor.

"I got on with a prisoner—a murderer," he said coldly, "and that gang turned him loose."

"Got on at Modoc?" asked the conductor.

"Yeah."

From down the track came the whistle of a locomotive. The conductor swung down and ran toward the front of the train, as the engine came backing around the curve, shoving the express car. There was a great bobbing about of lanterns near the car, as the train jerked from the jar of the coupling. Came a shrill blast of a whistle, and the train began slowly backing toward Modoc.

The sheriff turned and went back into the car, followed by Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Did you say that yore prisoner was a murderer?" asked Hashknife.

"What's it to yuh?" Thus the sheriff sarcastic in his anger.

"Don't antagonize him, I tell yuh," warned Sleepy. "He's the sheriff, and he's got a awful mad spell upon himself."

"You think you're smart, don't yuh?" queried the sheriff.

"Well, mebbe I ain't so smart," said Sleepy seriously, "but I'm sure cautious. As far back as we've ever traced our family tree, there has been a cautious streak. Yessir, the old sap jist fairly oozes caution. Now——"

"Aw, to —— with your family tree!" snorted the sheriff.

"That's what I always told pa. I don't hold with no——"

"My ——!" breathed the sheriff wearily and moved away down the car.

* * *

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy exchanged mirthful glances and secured their valises. The train was backing into the depot at Modoc; so they swung on to the platform and headed up the main street of the town. Neither of them cared to stay there at the depot and hear a rehearsal of the hold-up; and it would likely be relief for the sheriff to know that he was rid of their presence.

The main street of Modoc was not well-enough lighted for them to get much of an idea of the town, but from the number of hitch-racks and the general appearance of the street it appeared to be a well patronized cow-town.

Most of the buildings were of the false-fronted variety, but here and there a two-story frame building lifted its top a trifle above the ordinary. It seemed that the business district was composed mostly of saloons.

Out in front of one, which bore the title of Rest Ye All, a fat cowboy was doing his little best to brace up the front of the place, while he sang mournfully:

"I don' wanna play in yore yard,
I don' like you any mo-o-o-ore.
You'll be sor-r-ree when you see me-e-e-e
Slidin' dow-w-wn our cel-lur-r doo-o-o-or.
You can't hol-ler dow-w-wn our rain bar'l,
You can't climb our apple tree-e-e-e;
You can't play in ow-w-wer yar-r-r-rd,
'Cause you won't be good to me-e-e-e-e."

Hashknife and Sleepy waited until he had finished and was still panting from clinging quaveringly to the personal pronoun at the end of the chorus.

"You've got a good voice, pardner," said Hashknife.

"Y'betcha," agreed the cowpuncher heartily. "Yuh like to hear me sing?"

"Nope. You've got a good voice—but not for singin'. Do yuh think this saloon would fall down, if yuh moved away?"

The cowpuncher grunted, shoved himself away from the wall and grasped a porch-post firmly with both arms.

"Now whatcha goin' to do?" asked Sleepy.

"Sing. I'm sad, don'tcha know it? My —— but I'm sad. And when I'm sad—I seeng, thasall."

"Oh, yo're a seenger, are yuh?" laughed Hashknife. "Well, hop to it, brother. Far be it from us to curtail yo're sadness."

"That's real kind of yuh, I'm sure."

The cowboy almost fell off the sidewalk in trying to bow his appreciation, but Sleepy steadied him and helped him get a fresh grip on the post.

Hashknife and Sleepy passed on into the saloon, while the puncher lifted his voice in a wailing sort of a dirge, which bore a certain resemblance to "When You and I Were Young, Maggie."

The Rest Ye All was rather a pretentious place inside. A long, mahogany bar extended down the left side, backed by an ornate but damaged mirror. The walls were decorated with oil paintings of considerable merit, mounted in gaudy frames. Even the lamps were decorative.

The barroom proper was about thirty feet long by twenty feet wide, with an archway at the rear, which led to the gambling parlor. As Hashknife and Sleepy stopped at the bar they caught a glimpse of several gaudily dressed women in the rear room, and to their ears came the rattle of poker-chips, the whir of a roulette-wheel, the soft voice of a dealer at a stud table.

The pink-faced bartender, with a diamond horseshoe in his shirt front, lifted his eyebrows in interrogation. Hashknife and Sleepy made known their wants and drank silently.

"Yuh got quite a place here, pardner," observed Hashknife.

"Yeap." The bartender carefully polished the bar and replaced the bottle.

"Swellest place this side of New York."

"Coverin' a lot of territory, ain't yuh?" asked Sleepy.

"I've never been to New York," grinned the bartender.

"You spent much time between here and there?" queried Hashknife.

"Nope. I've been as far East as Cheyenne."

"Thasso? You must like to travel."

At this time the fat cowboy came inside and weaved up to the bar, where he goggled at Hashknife.

"I'm Sody Slavin," he announced, and added, "And I'm sad within me. They took m' friend Bud Daley t' prison, don't-cha know it? And all he done was t' kill a cashier and steal twenty thousand dollars. This here country is gettin' too antisheptic for me, by gosh."

Hashknife squinted at Sleepy, who was making faces at himself in the back bar mirror. Came the sound of excited voices outside, and the sheriff came in, followed by several men. Sody squinted at the sheriff and reached for him with both hands.

"Whazzamatter?" blurted Sody. "Where's Bud?"

"Aw, go to ——!" snorted the sheriff, shoving Sody aside, and heading for the back room.

Hashknife and Sleepy followed them into the gambling-room. Cleve Lavelle was just coming in from the rear, and the sheriff went straight to him with the news, blurting it loud enough for every one to hear.

Those at the games quit playing and crowded around, while the sheriff told them what had taken place. But he only told of the cutting loose of the express car and the loss of his prisoner.

"They robbed the passengers, too, didn't they?" asked Hashknife.

The crowd turned their attention to Hashknife. Breed squinted at him and shook his head.

"No. That brakeman got so excited that he thought everybody was robbed. None of the passengers were molested, except me."

"How much did they git?" queried a cowboy.

"Not much," said the sheriff. "They dynamited the express safe, but didn't get much. The messenger said that it was empty."

"And Bud Daley got away from yuh, eh?" chuckled another.

"Oh, hurray! Hurray!" whooped Sody, who had followed them in. "Hurray f'r ol' Bud."

Sody's enthusiasm drew a laugh from the crowd and lessened any sympathy that might have gone to the sheriff.

"It seems to me that there ought to be more action and less talk," observed Hashknife. "A train robbery and an escaped murderer ought to make a sheriff do somethin' besides talk himself tired."

Dug Breed squinted at Hashknife and Sleepy closely.

"Takin' quite a lot of interest in this ain't yuh?" asked Breed sarcastically.

"Well," Hashknife grinned softly, "I'm a citizen, and I kinda like t' feel that I'm protected by the law."

"You ain't," declared Sody seriously. "P'tect yourself, stranger. The law means right, but she's plumb flat-footed around here."

Breed grunted angrily and looked around, as though wondering just what reply to make. Hashknife grinned at Sody, who nodded owlishly and essayed a few jig-steps.

"Who are these two men, Dug?" asked Lavelle.

"—— if I know!" snapped Breed. "They were on the train."

"We're just a couple of helpless mortals," said Hashknife slowly. "We're lookin' for a peaceful place, thasall. We finds that we ain't safe on a train; so we unloads here. Ain't no objection to it, is there?"

"Not that I know of," said Lavelle.

"Well, that's nice of yuh, I'm sure," said Hashknife. "We both thank yuh. My pardner is kinda timid; so I does the talkin'."

"Myah!" snorted Breed angrily, and turned his back on Hashknife.

"Goin' to git up a posse, Dug?" asked a cowboy.

"Y'betcha." Breed turned and walked swiftly back toward the barroom.

"Let's go and find a hotel, Sleepy," said Hashknife.

"Hotel, ——!" snorted Sody. "Git yore broncs and come out to the ranch with me.

"We ain't got no broncs, Sody," grinned Hashknife.

"Ain'tcha?" Sody took this under advisement. "I'll git yuh some."

"Not tonight," said Hashknife. "We'll hit the hay in a hotel tonight."

"All right," grudgingly. "I'll see yuh 'morrow. Yo're the kinda folks I like, and you'll like ol' Jim Miller's outfit. He's got the JM outfit; *sabe?*"

They talked outside and Sody pointed out the hotel down the street.

"Who's the feller that the sheriff talked to back there in the saloon?" asked Sleepy.

"Tha's Cleve Lavelle."

"Outside of his name, what is he?"

"Mos'ly everythin'," said Sody. "Owns everythin', almost. Owns the 76A ranch, too."

"Was Bud Daley a friend of yours?" asked Hashknife.

"Yo're —— right. Bud's a dinger. And he's loose, ain't he? Tha's fine, y'betcha. Good ol' Bud. I don't like Dug Breed. He's the sheriff. I'm jist as pop'lar with him as a set of delirium tremens."

"And they put the deadwood on Bud, did they?"

"Oh, pos'tively. Twelve good men and true said he was guilty. Uncle Jimmy Miller and Cleve Lavelle hired the bes' lawyers yuh ever seen, but they cinched him. Bud wouldn't talk. My ——, I can't con-shee-ve of anybody not talkin', in a case like that. I'd talk so much and so fast that the judge would never have a chance to pronounsh shentence. That's me—a man of many words."

"The sheriff was takin' him to the pen, wasn't he?"

"Exactly. Oh, indeed he was, yessir. Bud was shentenced yesterday. They gave him twenty years."

"Who do yuh reckon took him away from the sheriff?" asked Hashknife.

"Who? I dunno. I've got to do a lot of thinkin' before I can shay pos'tively. I'll buy a drink."

"Not tonight," laughed Hashknife. "Do yuh think they'll catch Bud Daley?"

"I refuse to state." Sody grew very wise and serious. "If Bud don't want to be caught, tha's another matter en-tirely. Bud's forked, don'tcha know it? He'll fight. Yessir, I kinda look for gore to be spilled before they git ol' Bud agin'."

They shook hands with Sody and went on toward the hotel.

"What do yuh think of it, Hashknife?" queried Sleepy.

"Looks like Bud Daley had growed horns and a tail, Sleepy. But yuh never can tell. We'll sleep over it."

"We ought to have stayed on that train," said Sleepy. "The first thing we know we'll be sharpenin' our horns agin'—and this don't look like a one-man proposition."

THERE was little excitement in Modoc the next morning. The sheriff and his posse, which consisted of Charley Morse, the deputy sheriff, "Monte" Sells, foreman of the 76A ranch, Frank Asher, of the same outfit, and Steve Harris, of the 4X, had not come back to town.

Hashknife and Sleepy ate breakfast late and ran into Sody Slavin at the post office. Uncle Jimmy had come in with him, and Sody lost no time in introducing Hashknife and Sleepy to him.

"Sody tells me that you was on the train last night when it was held up," said Uncle Jimmy.

"Yeah, we were there," grinned Hashknife. "Yuh see, we were on our way here to make Bud Daley a little visit. We came in by stage through the Brant River country to Dixon; and found ourselves so close to Modoc that we figured it would be kinda handy to drop off and see Bud."

"Thasso? You knowed Bud before, eh?"

"Sure. We used to work with him. Tell us somethin' about the trial, will yuh?"

Uncle Jimmy related everything, according to the evidence, while the four of them sat on the edge of the board sidewalk and dug their heels into the dirt.

"There wasn't a lot of evidence ag'in him," explained Uncle Jimmy. "That rosette off his chaps looked bad to the jury. Bud wouldn't tell where he was that night, and everybody knowed that Bud needed money. He jist sat there and let 'em convict him, without even arguin' about it.

"Me and Cleve Lavelle hired lawyers for him, but they didn't help Bud much, 'cause Bud wouldn't talk. He jist didn't seem to give a —— what they done to him. Old Jordan has been doin' his dangdest to find out what Bud done with that money, but Bud won't never tell.

"If he lives to serve that twenty years, he'll have twenty thousand dollars. Mebbe he looks at it thataway, I dunno. Didja ever know his wife, Hartley?"

"Yeah. Knowed her before she married Bud. This must 'a' been danged tough for her."

Uncle Jimmy nodded sadly.

"——, yes. May is salt of the earth."

"They can't take the ranch away from her, can they?" asked Hashknife.

"I dunno. Anyway, it ain't worth enough to battle about."

"Bud wasn't a success as a cattleman, eh?"

"He was doin' all right until somebody stole all his cows."

Hashknife's eyes opened a trifle wider and he looked sidewise at the old cattleman.

"Stole all his cows?"

"That's what Bud says. He had a nice herd started. Bought out the old Triangle outfit, about three miles west of here, and had it registered as the Triangle D. Bud had a little money, but not enough; so he borrows five thousand from Lavelle, who owns the Rest Ye All over across the street.

"Bud always was a gambler; so he takes that borrowed money and tackles the roulette. He sure was right that day, and he annexes ten thousand from Lavelle. That gives him fifteen thousand, and he soaks it all into cows."

"Was Lavelle sore?" asked Hashknife.

"No. Lavelle is a gambler. Bud should 'a' paid back that money right then, but he didn't. The round-up was about three weeks ago, and there ain't a Triangle D animal in the Modoc range.

"I don't *sabe* it no more than anybody else does. A lot of 'em think that Bud picked 'em up quietly and shoved the herd through the Crooked Cañon country and over to Black Wells."

"To keep from payin' Lavelle that five thousand, eh?" queried Hashknife.

"Seems to be the idea," nodded Uncle Jimmy. "He even went and tried to borrow ten thousand more from Lavelle, but didn't git it."

Hashknife laughed softly and shook his head.

"Our friend Bud has become a salty sort of a gent, it seems."

"Could he drive his cows out of the country and not have it known?" asked Sleepy.

"Could be done," said Sody. "Bud's place is kinda away by itself, and right on the old trail to Black Wells. He could 'a' worked easy-like, bunched 'em in the hills back of his place and hammered 'em out at night, and it wouldn't take more than a few hours to put 'em well into the Crooked Cañon country."

"But," demurred Hashknife, "if he sold 'em in Black Wells, it ought to be easy to find it out."

Uncle Jimmy spat viciously and shook his head.

"The only thing yuh ever find out in Black Wells is that it's a —— good place to keep yore mouth shut."

"It's a good place to dispose of stock," grinned Sody. "They don't even look at brands."

"Lavelle and Bud were good friends?"

"Well," grinned Uncle Jimmy, "he loaned Bud five thousand dollars, and then he paid half of his lawyer bill. I reckon that's friendship, ain't it?"

"Kinda has the ear-marks," smiled Hashknife. "Who do yuh reckon held up the train and turned Bud loose?"

"More friendship," laughed Sody. "Ol' Bud was pop'lar."

"Bud didn't trail with train-robbers, did he?" asked Hashknife.

Uncle Jimmy squinted closely at Hashknife and placed a horny hand on Hashknife's knee.

"You ain't pious, are yuh, Hartley?" he asked slowly.

Hashknife laughed and shook his head.

"Then don't build yuh any glass houses and start throwin' rocks. Friendship is friendship, accordin' to my way of lookin' at it, Hartley. I've heard that there was a —— of a lot of bad folks in the Modoc country—but there ain't none of us that say a prayer before we go to bed, 'cause we ain't afraid of anybody shootin' us in our sleep."

"I beg yore pardon, Jim Miller," said Hashknife softly. "I reckon I understand how it is."

"Thasall right," nodded Uncle Jimmy. "You know how we stand now."

"I'd like to see Mrs. Daley," said Hashknife. "Yuh see, we came here to see Bud, and we'd like to do what we can for his wife."

"Mebbe we can get horses at the livery stable," suggested Sleepy.

"Yuh can, but yuh won't need to," grinned Sody. "I dragged in a couple of extra broncs with me this mornin', and they're over at the hitch-rack, waitin' for yuh."

"You fellers kinda hypnotized Sody, didn't yuh?" laughed Uncle Jimmy. "He wouldn't do that much for me. I remember——"

"No, yuh don't," interrupted Sody. "I've done a lot for you."

Uncle Jimmy got to his feet and brushed off his knees.

"There ain't no use arguin' with yuh,

Sody," he declared. "You ain't noways changeable. I never did see anybody as set in their ways as you are. I sure made a awful mistake when I made you foreman of the JM outfit—I should 'a' given it to yuh."

"It ain't too late," grinned Sody. "But if yuh do I'll fire yuh right off the reel. I'd want capable men on my ranch."

They went over to the hitch-rack and untied the horses. Sody had brought a couple of hammer-headed, evil-eyed animals for Hashknife and Sleepy; but he was not trying to play any tricks on them.

"They'll likely buck a little," he told them. "Mebbe they'll buck more than a little, but I didn't want to insult yuh by bringin' a couple of rockin'-chairs for yuh."

"If we git ditched, it'll be all yore fault," laughed Hashknife as he swung aboard.

Neither animal made any effort to buck, and Sody nodded wisely.

"Yuh can't fool a bronc," he declared as they rode out of town. "Them animals knowed right away that it wasn't no use tryin' to shuck you two fellers; so they don't waste their energy."

"I reckon we'll find Ma out at Bud's place," said Uncle Jimmy. "She didn't say she was goin' out there, but she will."

"Y'betcha," nodded Sody. "Where there's sufferin', you'll find Ma Miller."

IT DID not take them long to ride the three miles to the Triangle D ranch-house. A sorrel buggy team was tied to the fence near the house, and near the front porch was grouped a number of saddled horses.

"That's Ma's buggy team," observed Sody, "and them broncs belong to the sheriff's posse. I c'n tell Dug Breed's black animal."

They rode up and dismounted, just as Breed and his posse came out of the front door. Breed squinted hard at them, but did not say anything. Ma Miller, a tall, raw-boned woman, followed them out.

Her jaw was set at a belligerent angle, and it was plain to be seen that she was not at all in accord with the officers. She ignored Uncle Jimmy and the rest and centered her indignation upon Dug Breed and his men.

"Git off the ranch—the whole caboodle of yuh!" she ordered in a masculine voice. "Dug Breed, you ain't got the feelin's of a coyote. Trompin in like that! Didja expect to find Bud Daley here? You can't keep a man when yuh do git one.

"Anyway, you're a sweet-lookin' gang to be enforcin' the law. Yeah, I mean it, too. Monte Sells and Frank Asher! Steve Harris! Say, when did you snake-hunters git a license to hunt criminals? If we had a sheriff that'd uphold the law, you fellers would be huntin' the high places yourself."

They were riding away, making faces at each other, and Ma turned belligerently toward Uncle Jimmy and the others.

"You sure can tell 'em things, Ma," laughed Sody. "Whooee! Meet Mister Hartley and Mister Stevens, Ma. Gents, this is Ma Miller. Most men has a better half, but Uncle Jimmy has a better seven-eighths."

Ma grinned and shook hands with them.

"Ma, I'm sure glad to meet yuh," laughed Hashknife. "Yo're worth a lot to a man whose eyes hankers for the home folks."

"That's a reg'lar speech," laughed Ma Miller. "Didja say yore name was Hartley?"

"Yes'm. Hashknife, to m' friends."

Mrs. Daley had come to the door and was staring at Hashknife. Her face was tear-streaked and her eyes shadowed with sorrow, but she held out both hands at the sight of Hashknife.

"I heard your name," she said gladly. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Hashknife. And there is Sleepy Stevens!"

Hashknife took both of her hands, while Sleepy crowded in to shake hands with her.

"How in the world did you ever happen to come here?" she asked.

"We came here to visit yuh, Mrs. Daley."

"When did you come?"

"We was on the train that Bud was on, and we seen him turned loose."

Mrs. Daley looked away, her lips trembling.

"Then you know what has happened to us, Hashknife."

"Y'betcha. We've heard a lot of the story."

"Haven't you heard all of it?"

Hashknife shook his head slowly.

"Nobody knows all of it, ma'am. Yuh see, the last chapter ain't been written yet."

"By gosh, there's a lot of sense in that, too!" exclaimed Ma Miller. "May has been grievin' her heart out; but she don't know yet how it's goin' to turn out."

May smiled wistfully and shook her head.

"I don't see how things can be better for us, Ma."

"Well, they ain't got Bud in no danged prison," reminded Sody. "He's got a fightin' chance."

"Quit talkin' about it," grunted Uncle Jimmy.

"Anyway, I am awful glad to see you two boys," smiled Mrs. Daley. "Bud speaks about you so often."

She turned to Ma Miller and took her by the hand.

"Ma, you'll like these two men. Bud swears by both of them. He says that Hashknife Hartley—no, I won't repeat it—but it used to make me jealous. He used to wonder what old Hashknife and Sleepy are doing today, and wish that they would come along and advise him on certain things."

"I told yuh they was reg'lar folks," Sody grinned at Uncle Jimmy triumphantly. "By golly, I can pick 'em—drunk or sober."

"Are you going to stay a while?" asked Mrs. Daley.

"Yuh never can tell about us," smiled Hashknife. "We ain't gentlemen of leisure, but it kinda seems that we don't stay put in one place very long."

"You don't look like a pair of drifters," observed Ma Miller.

"No, ma'am," Hashknife shook his head. "We travel under our own power."

"Bud used to say that they were the best cowpunchers in the world, but they never punch cows," said Mrs. Daley. "He said they were alway too busy to work."

"What did he mean by that?" asked Sody.

Hashknife laughed and began rolling a cigaret.

"Yuh see, we're kinda unlucky—me and Sleepy. Everywhere we go we find somebody in a jam. We jist can't mind our own business—somehow. Personally, I'd like to settle down and grow old with the country; but Sleepy can't git over his childish ways; so I reckon we'll—keep movin' along."

"You won't have much for yore old age, will yuh?" asked Uncle Jimmy.

"Yeah, we'll have quite a lot," smiled Hashknife. "It won't be anythin' that yuh can cash in at a bank. And when we die, we won't leave nothin' spendable. There ain't nobody dependin' on either one of us, except the other."

"I think I know what you mean," said Mrs. Daley softly. "Bud told me some of the things you have done."

"Likely magnified 'em," grunted Sleepy. "Bud always did have a big imagination. We've been lucky, thasall."

"I hope it will never change," said Ma Miller earnestly.

"It won't, Ma—as long as we're right," said Hashknife. "Sometimes it's hard to be right. Humanity is a queer thing. We might do wrong through friendship, through a wrong hunch, or believin' a lie."

"If yuh want jobs, I'll give 'em to yuh," stated Uncle Jimmy. "I ain't got a danged thing for yuh to do, but that ain't goin' to interest nobody but me. Mebbe it'll be worth it to have somebody for Sody to argue with. He'll leave me alone. Harry McKee won't argue with him, and Dinah Blewette stutters so bad that he ain't got a chance in the world; so Sody makes me miserable. If there's anythin' on earth that I hate, it's an argument."

"Yeah, you do," growled Sody. "You hate it like yuh hate fried chicken. When you won't argue—you're in danged bad shape."

"Thasso!" Uncle Jimmy bristled belligerently. "Lemme tell yuh somethin', you——"

"Jim Miller, don't start it!" snapped Ma Miller. "My gosh, you two gallinippers make me tired. Your arguments never have no beginnin' nor end. And anyway, this ain't no time nor place for arguments."

"He started it, Ma," protested Uncle Jimmy. "He's always starts 'em, if yuh notice. All I done was to offer these two men jobs."

"They never asked yuh for a job, Jim."

"Didn't they? I s'pose I've got to be asked, have I? Say, who owns the JM ranch? Ain't I got a right to offer a job without bein' asked?"

"I'm the foreman," reminded Sody.

"Are yuh?" Uncle Jimmy teetered on the balls of his feet and hooked his thumbs over his cartridge belt. "You are, are yuh? That makes you quite important, eh? Anybody'd think you was the Grand Exalted Ruler of the Universe, Sody. I made yuh foreman, didn't I? Anybody'd think you was born thataway? You sure do wear yore honors lightly, fat feller. Well, go ahead and hire 'em, why don'tcha?"

Sody turned and looked seriously at Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Did you fellers want a job on the JM ranch?" he asked.

Hashknife and Sleepy both shook their heads. Ma Miller threw back her head and laughed, and even Mrs. Daley forgot her troubles long enough to join in the merriment.

"That was a lot of talk wasted," said Ma Miller, wiping her eyes with her apron. "But that's like Jim and Sody. I've been tryin' to convince May that she ought to come over to the JM and stay with us a while. She can't stay here alone."

"By golly, she sure can have the JM, if she wants it," said Uncle Jimmy. "That's her home. You come and live with us, May. Ma needs somebody to argue with, don'tcha know it. Then she'd leave me alone. I sure don't git much peace in this world—and yuh never can tell about the hereafter."

Hashknife laughed and threw away his cigaret.

"Now that's a good idea," he said seriously. "Suppose Mrs. Daley goes up to yore ranch and leaves us in charge here. We've got to have a place to sleep, and I don't like that hotel. We'll run the ranch for a few days."

"Why, you wouldn't want to do that," protested Mrs. Daley.

"Sure, we'd enjoy it," said Sleepy enthusiastically. "We hate hotels."

"But there's nothing here to do."

"*Esto buena*, as the Mexican says," laughed Hashknife. "If we wanted work, we'd 'a' grabbed Uncle Jimmy's offer."

"Well," said Mrs. Daley dubiously. "I don't know. There isn't a very big stock of food in the house, and the——"

"Ne' mind the food," grinned Sleepy. "We'll haul some out. If we see a fat JM on the hill, we'll eat steaks."

"I'll herd one down to yuh," offered Uncle Jimmy. "Or yuh might beef a 76A. Lavelle wouldn't miss one."

Hashknife happened to be looking at Mrs. Daley and noticed the quick flush that came to her white cheeks at the mention of Lavelle.

"Lavelle owns the 76A?" asked Hashknife.

"Yeah," nodded Uncle Jimmy. "He's the he-hawk of this country. Two of his men are in that sheriff's posse, but I'll betcha he'll give 'em —— when he finds it out."

"Mr. Lavelle has been very kind to us," murmured Mrs. Daley.

"Well, I'm glad we've got a place to stay," observed Hashknife, looking around. "Yuh don't mind if we keep them two broncs for a while, do yuh, Uncle Jimmy?"

"I should say not. Keep 'em as long as yuh want 'em. If there's anythin' else on the JM that yuh want, come a-hootin' and have at it. Ma, you and May git yore stuff into the buggy. By golly, it's goin' to be fine to have May back home ag'in. If Bud——"

Uncle Jimmy stopped and squinted toward the hills. The tears had come to Mrs. Daley's eyes again, but she turned and went into the house, while Ma Miller glared at Uncle Jimmy before following her inside.

It did not take them long to pack up what clothing Mrs. Daley wanted to take to the JM ranch, and they drove away down the dusty road. Uncle Jimmy and Sody shook hands with Hashknife and Sleepy, promising to drop in on them very soon.

"Bring yuh down a fat yearlin' t'morrow," promised Uncle Jimmy, "and mebbe Sody'll bring yuh a hatful of aigs."

THEY went out through the rear gate and swung into the hills, cutting across to the JM, which was about three miles to the North. Hashknife and Sleepy locked the house, mounted their horses and headed back toward town, itemizing the groceries they would need.

"Bacon," said Sleepy. "What do yuh think of the proposition?"

"May's prettier than she ever was," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "We gotta have a few cans of tomatoes."

"Ma's a dinger, Hashknife. How about some beans?"

"Beans? Sure. Who do yuh reckon stole Bud's cows? And matches. I never did live in a place where there was enough matches. And Uncle Jimmy ain't no— Sleepy, don't let me forget canned peaches. I love peaches. How's yore Durham?"

"Mine's all right; how's yours? You ought to buy some tobacco for yourself, Hashknife. Honest, yuh ought to do that. And if you forget bakin'-powder, I'll massacree yuh. 'Member the time we— Say, that posse sure got told about themselves, didn't they? Ma sure rattled their skeletons for 'em."

"And salt'n pepper," added Hashknife. "I suppose that posse went back to Modoc and got drunk."

And so they enumerated jerkily all the way back to Modoc, filled with joy at the prospect of doing their own cooking and of eating it.

To one who did not know Hashknife Hartley they might have classed him with the average irresponsible cowboy, but back in his serious mind was the germ of an idea.

Sleepy did not originate ideas. He was content to follow Hashknife's lead in all things; content to sit back and let the lanky one work out the salvation of both. In many things, Sleepy Stevens was a pessimist, an arguer, but open to conviction. He was outspoken in his likes and dislikes, as was Hashknife, ready to do battle for a friend, caring little for the future. Men had said that these two were animated antidotes for range poison—a title which had caused them much amusement.

Neither of them was a wizard with a six-shooter. In fact, their marksmanship was criticized by both; but cold nerve had carried them through some tough battles against men who were reputed to be lightning on the draw.

Both of them were good average rifle-shots, although neither would admit it. Sleepy loved trouble. His idea of bliss was to swap lead with somebody. Not hand to hand swapping; but a battle in the hills, long-range rifle-work. The *sping-g-g* of a high-power bullet, ricocheting off the rocks, was music to his ears.

But Sleepy was not blood-thirsty. It was all in a day's work with both of them. And their work had made them confirmed fatalists; confirmed humorists. They had laughed at death, laughed at life.

"And why not?" Hashknife had questioned. "Nobody knows what life is. Neither do they know what death means. When yuh see somethin' that yuh don't know nor understand, ain't it better to laugh than to cry over it?"

Hashknife was partly right when he prophesied that the posse had gone back to Modoc to get drunk. Breed and his deputy were cold sober, but the others were having their fill at the Rest Ye All bar, while their weary horses nodded at the hitch-rack.

Hashknife and Sleepy tied their horses at a rack in front of a general merchandise store and were ordering their groceries, when Breed came in. He watched them sack up their stuff and then followed them outside.

"Goin' batchin'?" he asked.

Hashknife grinned and nodded, as he tied a sack behind the cantle of his saddle.

"We're goin' to live at Bud Daley's ranch for a while."

"Oh, thasso?" The sheriff was interested. "You knew Bud, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah, we used to know him pretty well."

"His wife goin' to stay there?"

"Nope. She's gone out to the JM ranch. We'll be there alone."

"What's the idea?"

Hashknife knotted a string and squinted at it critically before he said:

"Well, now I don't reckon you could call it an idea, sheriff. We jist got tired of the hotel, thasall."

"Uh-huh."

The sheriff scratched his chin thoughtfully. Naturally, he wanted all the information possible. Bud Daley was still at large, and this might be a scheme to get him a grub-stake. But it might not be an opportune time to mention such a thing, he realized; so he nodded and walked away.

Sleepy went to the hotel, paid their bill, took their valises and came back to the horses. The half-broke bronchos objected to the valises, but were soon convinced that this excess baggage was there to stay. Dug Breed watched them ride away and grew thoughtful.

These two men rode well, he observed. They both wore guns, and their guns and belts seemed more practical than ornamental.

"That tall jasper ain't no man to fool with," he mused. "I dunno about the shorter one. I wish I knew what they are goin' to do out there at Bud's ranch. They're friends of Bud's, that's a cinch. But I can't stop 'em. There's no law against 'em living out there."

Breed shook his head, rubbed some of the dust out of his sleepy eyes and went across the street to the Rest Ye All.

THE 76A ranch was located about five miles northeast of Modoc. Lavelle had spent much money in making it the finest cattle-ranch in the country, although he did not spend much of his time at the ranch-house. A Chinese cook and a Chinese house boy had charge of the ranch-house, while Monte Sells was in charge of the ranch.

While no one had objected openly there

were many who did not exactly care for Sells, "Red" Blair, Frank Asher, "Mesa" Caldwell and Brent Allard, Lavelle's cowpunchers. They were a hard-riding, hard-drinking crew of men, who gave Lavelle back their salaries over the green cloth, or drank it up over his polished bar.

Just now Red Blair and Brent Allard were enjoying a cigaret *siesta* in the shade of a big cottonwood near the big red stable at the 76A. Red was lying flat on his back, his sombrero half-across his face. Blair was a big man, with high cheek-bones, eyes deeply set under bushy brows and a flaming thatch of red hair.

Allard was a smaller man, colorless, tow-headed, but with a cruel mouth and a deep knife scar along his right jaw-bone. His cigaret hung limply from his lips as he humped over on his haunches and drew meaningless patterns in the dirt with his forefinger.

"I'd jist like t' know where Monte got his information," he said musingly.

Red Blair grunted and brushed a fly off his nose.

"He won't tell," continued Allard complainingly.

"—— the flies!" Red grunted angrily, and sat up slowly to reach for a match.

"Wonder if the posse caught Bud Daley yet?"

Allard shook his head and spat disgustedly.

"I'd jist like to know who stuck up Dug Breed."

"You ought to buy a dictionary," said Red wearily.

"Why?"

"You want to know so —— much."

"Yeah?" Allard dug savagely at the dirt. "I don't like to risk my neck for nothin', Red."

"You didn't risk yore neck."

"Didn't, eh? Aw, I know. You fellers think yuh can do anythin' yuh want, as long as yo're workin' for Cleve Lavelle. Sure. He makes the sheriff and all that, and we're perfectly safe. But Lavelle didn't have nothin' to do with this, yuh must remember."

"He'd have somethin' to say," replied Red easily. "Yuh don't see the sheriff moseyin' around here, do yuh? Dug Breed knows which side his bread is buttered on, y'betcha."

"Stick yore head in the sand like an ostrich," grunted Allard. "That bird ain't the only animal that rams its head out of sight and thinks nobody can see the rest of it."

"Why don'tcha go back to Oklahoma?" queried Red. "You ain't got the guts of a canary-bird, Allard."

Red got to his feet, slapped his hat on his head and squinted toward the road.

"Here comes Monte and Frank," he grunted, "and they're ridin' kinda loose."

Allard got up and they walked down to the corral where Monte Sells and Frank Asher had dismounted. Both men had been drinking and were in a joyful mood.

"We've been upholdin' the law," declared Asher, yanking the saddle off his panting animal and almost upsetting himself.

"Yuh look like you'd been holdin' up a saloon," observed Red caustically.

"Didja find Bud Daley?" asked Allard.

"Find ——!" snorted Monte angrily. "Breed led us all over the —— hills in the dark. Mebbe he thought Bud would be carryin' a lantern."

"Yeah, and we went to Bud's house," laughed Asher. "Breed wanted to search the place, didn't he, Monte? Ma Miller was there. And what she told Breed was a plenty. Man, she sure read his sign for him."

"Read our epitaph, too," laughed Monte. "Said we'd be high-tailin' it a long time ago, if we had an honest sheriff."

"Wonder where Bud went," said Allard.

"You better go down and join Breed," snorted Monte. "He's in the same fix you are."

"Did Breed give up the posse idea?" asked Red.

"As far as we're concerned," laughed Monte. "Lavelle was sore as a boil, when he found that me and Frank was on the posse. Lavelle spent a lot of money, tryin' to clear Bud; and he said he'd be —— if he wanted his men to help run him down the hills."

"Bud's wife still at the ranch?" queried Red.

"She's gone out to the JM," said Asher. "Anyway, that's what Breed told us before we left. Couple of strange punchers goin' to batch at the Triangle D. Friends of Jim Miller, I reckon. They came out there about the time that Ma Miller hoodled us out of the house."

"Who are the strange punchers?" asked Red. "Didn't yuh hear their names?"

"Aw, Breed said that one of 'em was named Hartley, or somethin' like that. I don't know whether that's the name or not."

Allard moved in a little closer, his lower lip sagging, as if his half-smoked cigaret weighed pounds.

"Didja say 'Hartley,' Frank?"

"It was somethin' like that, Brent. I didn't pay much attention to the name."

"What kind of a lookin' feller, Frank?"

"Tall, skinny geezer."

"The other one was shorter? Kinda sad-faced and bow-legged?"

"That's him."

Allard brushed the cigaret off his lip and cleared his throat.

"That's Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens, by ——! And I'm draggin' m'self off this range right away."

Monte Sells stared at Allard for a moment and broke into a laugh. Allard was squinting into space, his lips shut tight.

"What's the matter with you, Allard?" asked Monte. "You act like this feller might be gunnin' for yuh."

Allard shook his head quickly.

"No, he ain't gunnin' for me, Monte. At least, I don't think he is. But he's jist bad luck, thasall. I've seen his work—him and the bow-legged one."

"Why you —— fool!" exploded Red angrily. "What can he do to you?"

"Not a —— thing!" snapped Allard. "'Cause I ain't goin' to give him a chance. I'm goin' away—a long ways away."

"Not a gut in his body," declared Red inelegantly, pointing at Brent Allard. "Runnin' away from a spook."

"Thasso?" Allard flushed indignantly. "I've got all I need to keep me in a healthy condition, Red. And I'm goin' to keep 'em, too. I wonder what them two are doin' around here."

Monte laughed shortly and hitched up his belt.

"They're just livin' at the Triangle D, thasall."

"No, that ain't all," declared Allard. "Jist livin' ain't all where they're concerned."

"They were on the train the night of the hold-up," volunteered Frank.

"Uh-huh-h-h," said Allard triumphantly. "And you —— fools think they're jist livin' here, eh?"

"Detectives?" queried Red a trifle uneasily.

"Malignantly," nodded Allard. "Hashknife Hartley can read yore mind, I tell yuh."

Monte laughed sarcastically and slapped Allard on the back.

"We'll see that our minds are clear of all evil, when we meet him, Brent. Don't be a fool. Hartley is just a human bein', ain't he? Well, I reckon we know how to deal with human bein's, don't we?"

"You said a heap," laughed Red. "If that pelican monkeys around us, we'll sure clip his wings, eh, Monte?"

"Hop to it," said Allard wearily. "But don't ask me to help yuh. I've warned yuh thasall."

Allard turned and walked toward the bunk-house, while the rest of the cowboys looked after him, a laugh on their lips.

"Scared plumb stiff," declared Monte.

"And," observed Frank seriously, "it ain't like Brent to get scared thataway. He ain't no coward, Monte."

"That's right," muttered Red. "Brent's no coward, but right now he's scared. Mebbe we better investigate this Hartley person. It's better to be safe than sorry, Monte."

"That's true enough, Red. If he's here to find trouble, we'll sure guide him to plenty of it, won't we?"

"Danged right. And we'll label it in big letters, so he won't make no mistake. I'm kinda anxious to see this pair of whip-poor-wills, m'self. If they're dangerous, the sooner we find it out the better it will be for all of us."

"Mebbe they'll be in town tonight," grinned Monte widely. "If they're not, we know where they will be."

"That's my idea, too," laughed Red.

III

DUG BREED was greatly disgruntled over his failure to find any clue to Bud Daley's whereabouts. He had not expected to find any trace of the train-robbers. The express messenger and the engine crew said that there were several masked men in the gang; but their failure to do more than damage the through-safe and the interior of the car hardly made them worth bothering with.

Breed was of the opinion that the hold-up was planned only as a means for taking Bud Daley away from him, because of the fact that an organized gang would hardly stick up a train and blow the express safe unless they were reasonably certain of some remuneration.

But he could hardly understand just who would do such a job. The JM outfit might have done such a thing. There were four men at that ranch. But Breed well knew that Sody Slavin was too drunk that night, and that Uncle Jimmy Miller had been at the depot to see Bud leave. This was a perfect alibi for the JM.

"I don't *sabe* it a-tall," he told Charley Morse, his deputy, who was tilted back in an office chair, trying to coax a tune from a home-made banjo.

Charley balanced the banjo on his knee while he rolled a cigaret. Charley was not very keen mentally, and Breed's worries bothered him very little.

"Bud's prob'ly got a gun, by this time," he observed.

"Yeah, he prob'ly has," agreed Breed.

"And he'll use it, too."

"What would you do, if yuh had twenty years starin' yuh in the face? Wouldn't you use a gun, Charley?"

"Y'betcha."

"All of which makes Bud a dangerous man," mused Breed.

"Gotta outsmart him, thasall," declared Charley, picking up his banjo and hunching to a comfortable position.

"Yeah? How would you outsmart him, Charley?"

Charley yawned widely and rubbed his nose. Charley was not slighted when they passed around noses.

"He's got a wife, Dug," said Charley. "He'll want to see her, won't he? Stick him up when he comes home."

"Uh-huh?" Breed squinted reflectively. It was not such a bad idea, at that, he agreed.

"He'll come home after grub, I reckon," added Charley. "Feller has got to eat."

"But his wife ain't home, Charley. She's at the JM ranch."

"Does Bud know it?"

Breed glared at Charley and spat disgustedly.

"How in —— do I know what Bud knows?"

"Have to watch both places, I reckon."

"All right. As soon as it gets dark we'll pull out. You go to the JM and I'll watch Bud's place. It ain't likely that he knows she went to the JM, Charley. Don't let nobody see yuh; *sabe* Cache yourself away where yuh can watch the house all night."

"——!" Charley threw the banjo on the table and fumbled for a match. "Set there all night, eh? I had a —— of a good idea, didn't I?" Charley rubbed an ear violently. "Next time I'll keep my danged mouth shut. Bein' real smart didn't git me anythin'."

"You prob'ly won't have much to do, Charley?"

"Only keep awake. I played poker all night, I'd have yuh know."

"That ain't my fault. You better take a shotgun along, 'cause you're cock-eyed already."

Breed went across the street to the Rest Ye All, where he sat in at a poker game. It was shortly before dark when the boys from the 76A rode in and proceeded to regale themselves with plenty of liquor.

Breed noticed that they talked among themselves, ignoring the games, but drank plenty of whisky. Then they went out and were gone quite a while, drifting back in singles to meet at the bar again.

"Lookin' for somebody," Breed decided.

More cowboys drifted in, and in a little while Breed cashed in his chips and drew out of the game. Charley was at the office, with the two saddled horses, and in a few minutes they were out of Modoc and on their way, unseen by any one in the town.

ABOUT a mile out of town the road forked; one road leading to the JM and the other to Bud's ranch. Breed gave Charley final instructions and they separated.

There was no moon, but the sky was brilliant with stars. The road led along the slope of the hills, winding in and out of the hollows, crossing an old water-course, deep in the shadows of cottonwood and willow, only to lead straight back into the sage-covered hill again.

Further on it skirted the side of a hill, and Breed could see a light in the ranch-house window. Somewhere a horse nickered shrilly. Breed drew up, dropped to the ground and placed a hand over his horse's muzzle. After a minute or two he went on, walking and leading his horse.

The road led in past the stable, but Breed dismounted in the brush before reaching the stable, tied his horse and went cautiously past the corral and stopped at the corner of the stable. He was not in a position to watch the entire house; so he went back to an open window, climbed inside the stable and felt his way to the door, which he found unlocked.

He shoved the door partly open and sat down. From here he could see part of the front porch, all of one side and the kitchen door. The horses moved uneasily for several moments, but settled down to their feeding.

He could not see the lighted window now. It was warm there in the barn. He found a saddle-blanket and a box, with which he made a comfortable seat, and settled down to his long vigil. He felt sure that Bud would not show up before midnight, if at all.

Then he did the natural thing under the circumstances—fell asleep. After all, a sheriff is only human, and he was comfortable.

He did not know what awakened him, but he suddenly found himself wide awake and staring out through the doorway. A man was between him and the house, bulking large in the half-light. As far as Breed could determine, this man was watching the house. Then he began moving slowly toward the front porch, apparently cautious.

Breed grunted to himself, drew his gun and stepped softly outside.

"He ain't takin' no chances," he observed to himself. "Bud always was cautious, and he don't know who might be in the house."

Swiftly but softly, Breed crossed toward the man, who was so intent on the house that he did not think of any danger from the rear, and when within about twenty feet, Breed stopped and spoke:

"Put 'em up real high, young feller."

The man whirled swiftly, and his answer was an orange-colored streak of fire and the crashing report of a revolver. Breed felt the wind from the bullet, ducked instinctively and shot from his hip. The man grunted, staggered sideways and went to his knees, shooting as fast as he could, while Breed's gun stabbed streaks of fire in his direction.

Then a bullet struck in the gravel a few feet from Breed and threw a spray of fine rocks into his face. He ducked sideways and almost ran into a bullet, which was coming from another direction; while from three different directions came the barking reports of six-shooters, all throwing lead at the sheriff.

Breed did not stop to question any one. He almost decided not to bother with a horse, but his course was in that direction. Luckily the corral gate was open, which gave him a chance for a long run before his jump, and he barely scraped a heel on the top pole of that seven-foot corral.

Hashknife and Sleepy were in bed when the first shot caused them to sit up, like a pair of mechanical toys. The next shot sent them out of bed, gun in hand and running toward the door; but the fusillade caused Hashknife, who was in the lead, to stop short, and Sleepy bumped violently into him.

"What the —— are yuh tryin' to do—knock m' teeth out?" demanded Sleepy. "Yore danged elbow is jist like a bay'net."

"Aw, hire a hall!" snapped Hashknife. "What's goin' on around here, anyway?"

The firing ceased. Some one ran past the front porch, crunching heavily on the gravel. Hashknife cautiously opened the door and peered out. All was serene. From far away came the sound of a running horse, and somewhere in the hills a coyote barked snappily and wailed dismally, as if protesting against being distubed.

"Well, now that sure does beat —— by a neck!" exclaimed Hashknife. "Jist why do they pick our little ranch to stage a battle?"

"Some of it was danged close, too," said Sleepy. "Them first few shots were right up against our house."

Hashknife led the way back to the bedroom, where they proceeded to dress and buckle on their belts.

"She's a small world," complained Sleepy, "when they have to come out to our yard to have their fights. What do you make of it, Hashknife?"

"Mebbe somebody was having' fun with us, Sleepy."

"Well, they've had it, cowboy. I'm a-quiverin' all over."

They went out on the front porch and looked around. There was not a sound to be heard. Hashknife led the way around the corner and stopped short. A man was lying flat on his back, looking up at the sky, arms outstretched. A few feet from him was a heavy six-shooter.

Hashknife knelt beside him and felt of his heart. He was still breathing, and as Hashknife touched him he groaned aloud.

"He ain't dead, is he?" asked Sleepy.

"Yeah. They always groan thataway after they're dead."

Hashknife got to his feet and dusted off his knees.

"Grab his feet, Sleepy; we'll take him in the house."

They carried him in and placed him on the floor, after which they lighted a lamp and looked him over. It was Red Blair; but he was an unknown to them. Hashknife made a brief examination of him and pronounced him a case for a doctor.

"And we ain't got no time to lose," declared Hashknife. "There's a buckboard down at the stable, and I reckon them other two horses are broke to harness. We'll take this jasper to Modoc and find out who he is."

It did not take them long to harness the team, load the wounded man into the buckboard, and head for town. The road was not very smooth, but Sleepy held the man down, while Hashknife drove the team at a stiff gallop most of the way.

IT WAS past midnight when they drove up to the Rest Ye All. The place was fairly well filled, and Lavelle was at the bar, talking with several men, when Hashknife asked the bartender where he could find a doctor.

"Somebody hurt?" asked Lavelle.

"Yeah," replied Hashknife, "I dunno who he is. There was a lot of shootin' goin' on out at Daley's ranch, and this feller must 'a' got in the way of some lead. He's out there in the buck-board."

There was a general exodus to the front of the saloon, and Hashknife soon found out who the man was. Lavelle took immediate charge and sent a man for the doctor.

"Mind telling me how it happened?" asked Lavelle.

Hashknife told him what he knew of the matter, but it was evident that Lavelle did not believe a word of it. Some one was sent after the sheriff, who appeared in a few minutes. He made a great show of asking questions, which no one could answer—except the sheriff himself—and he grew absent-minded, trying to appear at ease and to puzzle out what Red Blair was doing at the Triangle D ranch, and who did the shooting after Red Blair went down.

He felt sure that Hashknife and Sleepy were telling the truth, as strange as it might seem to those who did not know. The doctor took charge of the wounded man, and Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the ranch, wondering what Lavelle's cowpuncher was doing at their doorstep, and who shot him.

"This," declared Hashknife, "sure as —— has got me fightin' my head, Sleepy. What did that red-headed puncher want out there? Who shot him? Was all them shots fired at the jasper that shot this Red Blair? Who were they? Sleepy, I'll be darned if this ain't some mix-up."

"Do yuh reckon Bud Daley was mixed up in it?" queried Sleepy.

"That's hard to tell, Sleepy. There's a lot of things to work out. F'r instance, who stole Bud's cows? Who robbed the bank? Who held up that train? Why did they take Bud away from the sheriff? What in —— was Red Blair doin' out there tonight, and who shot him? My gosh, no wonder Sherlock Holmes was a hop-head."

"Well," laughed Sleepy, "yo're happy, ain't yuh, cowboy?"

"Gittin' thataway," laughed Hashknife.

They unsaddled at the stable and went to the house, but drew all the curtains before lighting the lamp. Hashknife started toward the bedroom, but stopped and squinted toward a corner of the living room.

"Sleepy," he asked, "wasn't there a rifle in that corner when we left here?"

"By jolly, I think there was, Hashknife. It was there the last I seen of it."

"Uh-huh," Hashknife strode into the kitchen with the lamp and looked around, with a wide grin on his face.

"We've had a visitor," he stated. "Bud's been here after a gun and a grub stake, Sleepy. That dog-gone pantry is jist about cleaned out, and I'll betcha we're shy a horse and saddle."

"That's fine!" grunted Sleepy. "Takes a load off m' mind. I was kinda worryin' about Bud, but we know he's all right now."

They went back to the bedroom and undressed.

"I wish we'd 'a' been here," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "I've got a lot of questions to ask that danged fool."

"What about, Hashknife?"

"Oh, about hang-nails, and if he's bothered with dandruff," replied Hashknife sarcastically. "If I've got to live with an idiot, I might as well be crazy, too. Good night."

One of their horses was missing in the morning, but Bud took his own saddle.

Sleepy saddled one of the buggy team and found it a much better riding than harness animal. They went to Modoc, where they found that Red Blair was still unconscious and that the doctor was still prospecting him for bullets.

Dug Breed made a show of questioning Hashknife, while Cleve Lavelle listened. But Hashknife had told all he knew the night before. Lavelle was thoughtfully serious, and the bartender confided to Hashknife that Lavelle had lost a lot of money at stud poker last night.

"And that's the first time anybody has tapped him hard since Bud Daley took ten thousand out of here," stated the bartender.

"Lost his luck?" queried Hashknife grinning.

"I betcha." The bartender breathed tenderly upon a glass, and polished it carefully.

"Lavelle's sure out of luck when they can hit him hard."

"Gamblin' is a queer profession," mused Hashknife. "They're all superstitious. They make up their mind that somethin' brings 'em luck—and it does. I reckon it's just another case of mind."

"Lavelle's thataway," laughed the bartender. "Horse-shoes, pins on the floor, pointin' toward him, pictures hangin' crooked on the wall—oh, a lot of hoodoo or good-lucks."

"Alle same Injun medicine-bag, eh?" grinned Sleepy.

"That's it."

Lavelle came in and walked over to the bar, inviting the two cowboys to have a drink.

"How far is it to Black Wells?" asked Hashknife as they lifted their glasses.

"About thirty-five miles," said Lavelle.

"Good road?"

"Good enough for a saddle-horse. Been neglected so long that it wouldn't be passable for a wagon. Thinking of going there?"

Hashknife nodded slowly.

"Yeah, I'm goin' over there, Lavelle. Have you got any idea what could have become of Bud Daley's cattle?"

Lavelle laughed and indicated for the bartender to fill up the glasses gain.

"Just between us," said Lavelle, "I think that Bud sold his cattle."

"In Black Wells?"

"Perhaps. That is the best place."

"Well," said Hashknife, "we're goin' over there and see what we can see. There ought to be somebody there that could put us on to the right track."

"If they would. Black Wells," said Lavelle slowly, "is one place where it's hard to get folks to talk."

"We never get folks to talk," said Hashknife. "Let 'em alone and they'll tell everythin'. Well, Sleepy, we better be hittin' the grit. We've got to stop at the JM outfit a while, and I dunno if them hammer-headed broncs are good for thirty-five miles, or not."

"You two were on the car the night the hold-up men took Bud away from the sheriff, wasn't you?" asked Lavelle.

"Y'betcha," grinned Hashknife. "I'll never forget it. They tried to rob me and Sleepy, but I told 'em that all we had left was the draggin' end of a pair of railroad tickets, so he dug into his pocket and tossed me some money for a breakfast stake."

Lavelle laughed and lighted a cigar.

"How much did he give you?"

"I dunno. It wasn't much. Well, c'mon, Sleepy; let's hit the grit."

Monte Sells and Frank Asher were riding into town, as Hashknife and Sleepy rode out. Monte squinted closely at them and turned in his saddle to watch them fade out down the road in a cloud of dust.

THE Miller family, Mrs. Daley and the cowpunchers were all at the JM and greeted them warmly. Sody noticed that Sleepy was riding one of Bud's horses and asked him what was wrong with the JM horse.

"Bud took him," laughed Hashknife. "From what we can observe, Bud has a horse, grub and a gun. He took that rifle out of the corner of the front room, cleaned out the cupboard and lifted a horse."

"Oh, did you see him—talk to him?" exclaimed Mrs. Daley.

"Wish I had," said Hashknife. "We wasn't there when he came. We was packin' Red Blair to a doctor."

"What happened to Red Blair?" asked Uncle Jimmy.

Hashknife described what had happened at the ranch the night before, and Dinah Blewette almost choked to death, trying to express himself. Sody hammered him on the back and ordered him to use his ears and let his tongue alone.

"Do you suppose that Bud had anything

to do with it?" asked Mrs. Daley wonderingly.

"He didn't have no gun," said Sleepy. "Least we don't reckon he did. It was after that when he took the rifle."

"Well, tie up yore horses and have somethin' to eat," invited Ma Miller. "You two gallinippers are jist like every other puncher I ever knowed—always show up at meal-time."

"Ma throws a mean flock of food," grinned Uncle Jimmy. "I know she's bakin' bread and there's beans in the oven, too."

"Oh, we'll stay," said Hashknife. "My gosh, we'll stay."

The wide porch of the ranch-house looked inviting to Hashknife. Sody and Dinah were breaking a bronc at the corral, and this was inviting enough for Sleepy. Uncle Jimmy followed Ma to the kitchen, leaving Hashknife and Mrs. Daley together. They sat down in the shade, and Mrs. Daley waited for Hashknife to speak. His long, lean face was serious as he carefully rolled and shaped a cigaret before saying a word. Then—

"Where was you the night the bank was robbed?"

"Why, I was at home."

Mrs. Daley looked curiously at him, and a fear clutched at her heart. Did he know that Cleve Lavelle was out at the ranch that night, she wondered?

"Wasn't Bud home that night?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly.

"No, he did not come home."

"Where'd he go that day—to Modoc?"

"I—I think so. He said he was going to see the sheriff about the stolen cattle."

"Uh-huh," Hashknife smoked thoughtfully. "Are him and Breed good friends?"

"No, I do not think so."

Hashknife turned and looked directly at her, as he said—

"Lavelle thinks that Bud sold his cows and lied about 'em bein' stolen."

"That is not true! Why, Bud wouldn't do a thing like that. You ought to know Bud better——"

"I didn't say it," interrupted Hashknife. "Lavelle said it."

"Well, it's not true. We were just getting a good start in life, when this all happened."

"All right." Hashknife nodded and shoved his hat onto the back of his head. "Why didn't Bud talk at the trial?"

"Why didn't he talk?" Mrs. Daley looked at Hashknife closely.

"Yeah. He didn't even try to tell where he was that night."

"No, he didn't tell," Mrs. Daley spoke softly. "He wouldn't tell anything."

"Feller ought to talk," said Hashknife slowly. "Did he ever tell you that he didn't do it, May?"

"No." Softly.

"Did he ever tell you where he was that night?"

"No."

"Say!"

Hashknife turned half-around and looked at her. She lowered her eyes, but he put his hand on her shoulder and she looked up at him, her eyes filmed with tears.

"May Daley, did Bud talk to you a-tall?"

She bit her lips to try and keep back the tears, as she shook her head.

"Why didn't he?"

"I—I do not know."

"Grub-pile!" yelled Uncle Jimmy. "Come and git it!"

Hashknife helped her to her feet and she gripped his hand tightly as she looked up at him.

"Why do you ask me these questions?"

Hashknife grinned down at her and shook his head.

"I can't tell yuh yet, May. I don't want yuh to think that I'm meddlin' into yore personal affairs; but I'd like to ask yuh if yuh still care for Bud?"

"More than any one in the world, Hashknife Hartley."

Hashknife nodded slowly.

"I hope he knows that, May. If I wasn't his friend I'd think he was guilty; but friendship makes it look different."

"Do you—" she faltered—"do you think there is any way of saving him?"

Hashknife grinned and patted her on the arm.

"Miracles do happen," he told her smiling. "I saved half of my salary one year. Let's eat and forget it."

THE town of Black Wells was on the east side of the range and on the main line of the railroad, the branch of which extended into the Modoc country, but from a point much farther South.

Until the building of this branch line, all the cattle of the Modoc had been herded into Black Wells for shipment; but since then, Black Wells had ceased to be more than one of the many little cattle-towns along the railroad.

Its one street was little more than a dusty road, bordered by false-fronted, unpainted buildings, which looked as if they might fall down in the next gust of wind; their signs were faded and dimmed by time.

The railroad did not come within a quarter of a mile of the town and it seemed that the town did not like the railroad well enough to move over close to it. The little depot stood bravely forth in the sage-covered plain, and a few hundred yards from it were the big corrals and loading-pens, fast falling apart from neglect.

Hashknife and Sleepy rode into Black Wells after dark, put their horses into a corral, foraged some hay and went hunting for a hotel. A frowsy hotel-keeper answered their banging on the front door, grumbled at being disturbed, but finally agreed to give them a place to sleep.

He held up his overalls with one hand, a smoking oil-lamp in the other, and padded along barefooted to a door, which creaked a protest at being disturbed.

"Ain't used to puttin' up folks at night," he explained. "The hotel business ain't what it used to be. I've seen the time when this old Californy House was loaded to the guards. I'll leave yuh fix up the bed the way yuh want it. This lamp ain't got more'n enough ile to see yuh to bed, and I'll be darned 'f I'd ever fill one by match-light."

He placed the lamp on a rickety dresser and peered around.

"How about a little water, pardner?" asked Hashknife.

"Water? T'night Nope?," He shook his head violently. "Fetch yuh some in the mornin'. That —— old pump is hard t' find in the dark, and she's gotta be primed to beat ——, or yuh don't git nothin' to come up."

He padded out, shut the door and went down the narrow hallway, complaining audibly. The room was hot, unventilated; but both cowboys were too tired to care about that. They flopped on the old bed, which creaked and groaned at every move, and stayed there until daylight, when they went wearily down the hall and on to the front porch.

Black Wells woke up by degrees. A mongrel dog got up from in front of the Welcome saloon, turned around three times, lay down. Then it got up, yawned widely, snapped at a fly and went down the street toward a watering-trough.

Somewhere a door banged shut, and some one began whistling discordantly. A high-pitched voice complained profanely against the whistler, who stopped whistling long enough to tell the plaintiff to go plumb to ——. A window slammed down and there came a tinkle of broken glass.

"You —— fool, that winder has been cracked ever since eighteen eighty-six!" complained a feminine voice. "Whatcha slammin' it down fer?"

The reply was muffled. A man came across the street, leading a horse to the watering-trough. He began manipulating the rusty old pump-handle, which screeched loud enough to wake every one. Another man came out of a one-story building across the street; a short dumpy man, bearded to the eyes. He slid back the wide door of the blacksmith shop and went inside, where he busied himself singing a tuneless song and beating time on the anvil. The proprietor of the hotel, evidently fearful that Hashknife and Sleepy might get away without paying for their lodging, came out on to the porch, still using his two hands in lieu of suspenders.

"Howja sleep?" he asked.

"With our eyes shut," said Hashknife.

"Howja find the bed?"

"That wasn't a bed," said Sleepy dryly, "that was a buggy."

The man seemed aggrieved.

"Yuh can't expect no New Yawk accommodations in Black Wells. ——, man; yo're in the West. Black Wells is a good town. Whatcha like for breakfast—coffee or tea?"

Hashknife laughed and got to his feet.

"That's what I've always heard about Black Wells—yuh can get what yuh want. We'll take coffee."

"Yuh sure can git anythin' yuh want," admitted the proprietor. "She's a he-man's town, y'betcha."

He went back into the house. The blacksmith was still singing to the music of his anvil, his voice quavering with the intensity of feeling. Hashknife grinned and nodded toward the shop.

"That feller's human, Sleepy. My bronc has a loose shoe; so we'll give the singer a job, and mebbe he'll talk."

They got the horse at the corral and took it to the shop. The blacksmith grinned good-naturedly and examined the loose shoe.

"Better take her off and shape her up li'l', eh?" he asked.

"Yo're the doctor," said Hashknife. "Do yore job."

"Quite a town yuh got here," observed Sleepy.

The blacksmith looked up from his work and squinted at Sleepy.

"You tryin' to be funny, or start an argument?" he asked.

"Neither one," grinned Sleepy. "But that's the regular thing to say, ain't it?"

The blacksmith laughed and walked back to his forge, where he shoved the shoe into the fire and leaned heavily on his bellows pole.

"You fellers are strangers here," he said slowly. "I *sabe* the JM brand on this bronc, and I *sabe* the Modoc. I ain't been here long, but I know everybody by their first name. Black Wells is a —— of a town, any old way yuh look at it."

"Ain't much since Modoc quit bringin' their cows over here, I reckon," said Hashknife. "I dunno how yuh make a livin'."

"Oh, I manage to get a little job now and then."

"Know the 76 A outfit?"

"Know of 'em. I put a couple of shoes on a 76 A bronc not long ago. That was the first job I had, after I opened this shop."

"You been open long?"

"Less than a month."

He took the shoe from the fire and shaped it carefully, while Hashknife sat on the edge of the slack-tub and watched him work.

"You must 'a' been here when them Triangle D cows were brought over here," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "That wasn't more than a month ago."

The blacksmith squinted thoughtfully for a moment.

"No, I don't remember them. Mebbe that was before my time. Who owned them Triangle-D cattle?"

"Bud Daley."

"Oh, yeah. He was the feller that robbed the Modoc bank, wasn't he? And then got away from the sheriff?"

"That's the feller."

"I dunno him. How did he happen to bring his cows over here?"

Hashknife laughed shortly and shook his head.

"Do you know the sheriff of Modoc?"

"Nope." The blacksmith went over to the horse and fitted the shoe. "I dunno many folks over there. I used to be there a couple of years ago, but I went up to Pocatello, Idaho, and stayed there until jist a while ago."

"Over in Modoc they told me that Black Wells has a pretty bad reputation," said Hashknife, watching the blacksmith closely.

"I dunno." The blacksmith laughed shortly and came back to the forge. "I never seen anythin' bad about it. I suppose there's a certain gang that ain't teachin' no Sunday schools; but they jist kinda fade in and fade out of here. Nobody bothers me; so I keep my mouth shut and drive nails."

"After all," observed Hashknife, "that's the best thing to do."

"Safest, anyway," grunted the blacksmith.

The proprietor of the hotel came out on the porch, a huge bell in his hand, and proceeded to announce breakfast. Men began to drift in from all directions, and there was a sizable crowd in the dining-room, when Hashknife and Sleepy arrived.

No one spoke to them, but, being strangers, they created a certain amount of silent interest. Hashknife sized up the crowd and decided that Black Wells might be able to live up to advance notices. There were two men whose attire stamped them as saloon owners or gamblers, another whose tonsorial splendor shrieked of the fact that he mixed drinks for a livelihood. Another might be a keeper of a store. The rest were cowpunchers or cattlemen.

There was little conversation, except in a low tone. The proprietor of the hotel waited on table, assisted by a slatternly, middle-aged woman, who did not change expression during the meal.

After breakfast they filed silently out of the room. Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the blacksmith shop, paid for the work and took their horse back to the corral.

"I wish I knowed what in —— we came down here for," complained Sleepy. "This ain't my idea of a good place to stay."

"I want to find out if Bud sold them cows himself," replied Hashknife.

"All right," grinned Sleepy. "That's

somethin' yuh never did expect to find out down here."

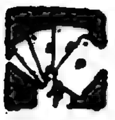
"You'd laugh at me, if I told yuh why I came, Sleepy."

"No, I'd fall dead, Hashknife."

They went into the Welcome saloon, where a poker game had already started. Hashknife looked the players over, but decided that there was too much dexterity shown by the dealer; so he did not take the vacant chair. The blacksmith came in, bought himself a drink and appropriated the chair.

Several hard-faced cowpunchers drifted in, took a few drinks and went away. It was hot. The old saloon reeked of stale liquor and tobacco smoke. Flies crawled over the bar and buzzed up and down the dusty mirror and windows.

The proprietor of the saloon, a crafty-faced individual, with an almost-bald head, which was knobby in contour, was in the poker game. He drank whisky copiously and perspired generously on his bald dome.



THE day passed slowly, dustily. The poker game was listless, and Hashknife and Sleepy dozed in a pair of chairs on the porch of the saloon. Cow-ponies stood listlessly at the hitch-racks, switching their tails wearily at the flies, while the sun beat down on the dusty street until the pine boards of the buildings oozed pitch.

"There ain't been a soul spoke to us all day," said Sleepy. "I hope to gosh that we pull out this evenin'. Even if they do use our dooryard to pull off their killin's, I'd rather be there than here."

Supper time came and about the same crowd went to eat. There was a little more conversation, because of the fact that much liquor had been consumed. Several of the men nodded to Hashknife and Sleepy, and the proprietor of the Welcome muttered something about it being a warm day for this time of year.

"They're thawin' out," grinned Hashknife.

"At a hundred and ten in the shade, they ought to," grunted Sleepy, wrinkling up his nose at the dishes of hot food. "I'd like to hit that old Crooked Cañon ag'in. It's cool there."

"Don't get impatient," said Hashknife. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Oh, that's what yo're doin' over here, eh? Buildin' another Rome."

They went back to the Welcome saloon and sat down. Men drifted in and started another poker game, but this time the proprietor of the saloon did not sit in at the games. He went behind the bar and let the bartender go to eat his supper, and his first act was to invite everybody up to have a drink.

Hashknife and Sleepy came up with the others, but stayed at the bar after the rest of the crowd had gone back to their drinks.

"You fellers goin' to locate around here?" asked the proprietor.

He had drunk enough whisky to make him just a trifle thick of tongue, but his eyes were keen.

Hashknife considered his question thoughtfully, but finally shook his head.

"Didja come from over in the Modoc country?"

The man was busy washing glasses and did not look up when he asked the question.

"Yeah, we rode in from there last night," yawned Hashknife.

The proprietor filled several bottles from a keg, arranged his glasses carefully and turned back to them.

"Many Modoc folks drift over this way?" queried Hashknife.

The man appeared interested in an argument which had started at one of the poker tables and did not answer, although Hashknife felt sure that he had heard the question. Finally he said:

"When are you goin' back to Modoc?"

"Mebbe tonight, we dunno," said Hashknife.

"Nicer ridin' at night than in the daytime."

The man looked straight at them when he spoke, and it seemed that his statement held a warning.

"That's right," grinned Hashknife. "It's kinda hot in the daytime. You know much about the Modoc country?"

"Not much."

Hashknife leaned across the bar and lowered his voice.

"Pardner, I'm lookin' for information. Do you know who Bud Daley is?"

The man squinted keenly at him, but lowered his eyes, a slight frown on his face. He was putting up a show of thinking. Then:

"I've heard the name. Didn't he git into trouble over there?"

"They say he shipped some stock from

here," said Hashknife, ignoring the question, "and we're tryin' to find out if that is the truth."

The man shook his head, but called to a cowpuncher who was watching one of the games. He was a frowsy, unkempt individual, who had been around there all day. He slouched over to the bar.

"Jud," said the proprietor, "here's a man who wants to find out if Bud Daley has shipped any stock from here lately?"

Jud licked his lips and reached for a cigaret-paper.

"Jud kinda has charge of the loadin' corrals," explained the proprietor.

"Bud Daley?" Jud seemed to be questioning himself. Then he looked at Hashknife keenly, "Whatcha want to know fer?"

"I'll trade answers with yuh," said Hashknife.

"Trade with me?"

"Yeah. You tell me if he has and I'll tell yuh what I wanted to know for."

Jud grinned wisely and licked the edge of his cigaret-paper. His eyes shifted to the face of the proprietor and back to Hashknife.

"Suppose I tell yuh I don't know," he suggested. "How'd yuh trade on that?"

"By tellin' yuh it wasn't none of yore —— business," replied Hashknife.

Jud gawped at Hashknife for a moment and flushed angrily.

"Yo're kinda salty, ain't yuh?" he queried.

Hashknife laughed with his mouth, but there was no mirth in his steady eyes. Jud fidgeted nervously, ripped a match viciously along the bar and lit his cigaret.

"I'll buy a drink," said the proprietor slowly.

Jud whirled on his heel and walked back to the poker-table, ignoring the invitation. The proprietor laughed and set out glasses and a bottle. He did not drink, but lighted a fresh cigar instead.

"This one is on me," said Hashknife, tossing a dollar on the bar, "I reckon that folks didn't lie to us when they said that we'd never find out anythin' in Black Wells."

He and Sleepy tossed off their drinks and went outside, leaving the dollar on the bar.

"My gosh, that's awful whisky!" exclaimed Sleepy. "No wonder this town hates itself. Where now?"

"Back to Modoc," said Hashknife, "I don't like this place."

They went back to the corral and began saddling. A moon had just come up over the Modoc hills. Sleepy was fussing with his cinch and looking at the moon. Then he stopped and grasped the saddle with both hands.

The moon was acting queerly. It seemed to advance and recede rapidly, and the queer motion was making Sleepy sea-sick. He looked over at Hashknife, who seemed to be acting strangely. Then a sudden dizziness struck him and he fell backward against the corral fence, where he slumped down in a heap.

It seemed to Sleepy that he had only been on the ground a short time, when he groped for the fence and managed to get back to his feet. The moon was high in the heavens now, and he wondered how it had got up there in such a short time. He was still nauseated, hazy; but the cool night breeze revived him rapidly.

The horses were still there. He crossed the corral, where he found Hashknife leaning against the fence, his head on his hands.

"Say, what in —— happened?" queried Sleepy painfully.

Hashknife groaned and straightened up. He looked at Sleepy and laughed hoarsely.

"Feel in yore pockets, Sleepy?"

Sleepy did so.

"Anythin' missin?" asked Hashknife.

"Well, I'll be —— if I ain't shy about ten dollars!"

"They cleaned me out," groaned Hashknife, "I'm as clean as a new six-gun barrel."

"Well, what in —— is the answer?" demanded Sleepy angrily.

"Them last drinks," said Hashknife, "they must 'a' filled 'em full of knockout drops, Sleepy. I've been doped before, but I never got all there was in the world in one drink. Waugh!"

"They doped and robbed us?" queried Sleepy.

"That's the answer."

"All right." Sleepy's voice was harsh with anger. "We'll go back to that Welcome saloon and take it back with interest. C'mon, Hashknife. I'll show that bunch of tin-horns somethin' quaint."

"Nope." Hashknife laughed and went back to his horse. "Me and you are goin' back to Modoc. It's late."

"You ain't goin' to let that bunch of sidewinders get away with all this, are yuh?" demanded Sleepy.

"They didn't get much."

Sleepy went to his horse, shook up the saddle and drew up the cinch. He was mad. They rode out of the corral gate and down the street. As they passed the Welcome saloon, Sleepy drew up his horse and peered through the window. There were several men at the bar and among them was the proprietor.

"Hang on to yourself," advised Hashknife. But he was too late.

Sleepy drew his gun and sent a bullet smashing through the window and into the back-bar. The crowd at the bar fell back in a panic. Another bullet bored through the broken window, splintered the back-bar mirror and played havoc with some bottled goods, which were on display.

A man threw open the door, but slammed it shut quickly, when a bullet buzzed in over his head.

"Yeow! Ye-e-e-ow!" whooped Sleepy. "Dodge, you Black Wells pickpockets!"

Three times more he sent bullets in through the windows, before he set spurs to his horse and went thundering out of Black Wells, riding high in his saddle and stuffing more cartridges into his six-shooter.

Straight out the old Crooked Cañon road they went and into the moonlit hills before they slackened pace.

"I sure gave 'em a receipt for my money," laughed Sleepy, looking back toward the town, "yo're too easy, Hashknife. I only hope that bunch of reptiles will be pickin' glass spinters out of their mangy hides for a month."

"Well," laughed Hashknife, "I dunno that I blame yuh, cowboy."

"Blame, ——!" snorted Sleepy, "I wish we'd 'a' gone in there and salivated the whole works. I was shootin' at the cash register, and I hope I rung up enough to make it worth while. You wanted to come to Black Wells, and I hope you're satisfied."

"I'm satisfied," answered Hashknife. "Perfectly satisfied."

"You didn't do no good for anybody."

"Didn't I?"

"Well, where in —— did yuh? You asked questions and got no answer. We got doped and robbed. And you're satisfied. Brother, it don't take much to satisfy you, does it? Sometimes, I wonder if you're just right in the head."

"My heart is in the right place, Sleepy."

"Yeah—and I suppose yore liver is accordin' to the location notice. You're actin' as happy as though you done some good there."

But Hashknife only laughed joyfully, in spite of the fact that his stomach was almost too weak to bear the drag of his heavy belt and gun.

IT WAS breakfast time the next morning at the 76A, when Dug Breed and Charley Morse rode in for breakfast. A rumor that Bud Daley was back in the Lost Pine country had given them eighteen hours of riding, with no results.

Monte Sells, Frank Asher and Brent Allard were eating, but stopped long enough to greet the sheriff and deputy, who sat down at the long table.

"A feller don't have to strain his eyesight to see that yuh didn't have much luck, sheriff," observed Monte.

He winked at the other two cowboys. Dug Breed noted the wink, but did not appreciate the humor of Monte's observation.

"Not much," said Breed dryly.

Frank Asher laid down his fork, rested his elbows on the table and leaned toward Breed, as he said—

"Breed, who do you think shot Red Blair?"

The sheriff had a cup of hot coffee at his lips, but he slowly lowered it to the table, his eyes searching the faces of the three men across the table.

"What in —— was Blair doin' out there?" he countered.

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Monte.

"Quite a lot." The sheriff seemed more at ease. "If we knew what Red Blair was doin' out there, we might get a line on who shot him."

Asher grunted and began eating, but Monte took up the discussion.

"What do yuh know about them two punchers who are livin' at Bud's place?"

"Not a thing."

"Did yuh ever think that they might 've had a hand in the shootin' of Red?"

"If you'll tell me what Red was doin' out there, I might say."

Brent Allard got to his feet and shoved back his chair.

"What's the use of arguin' about it?" he asked.

"I'm not arguin' about it," laughed Breed. "Red will likely tell us what he was doin' out there, as soon as he is able."

"The doctor don't think he'll get well," observed Monte. "I was down there last night. Them two punchers told about a lot of shots bein' fired out there that night. They claim to have found Red after the shootin' was all over."

Breed nodded slowly.

"Yeah, I know that's what they said."

"Who do yuh reckon done all the shootin'?" queried Allard.

"Didn't you say that there wasn't no use arguin' about it?" asked Breed grinning. "Don't ask me who done it, Allard; I didn't see 'em."

Breed and Morse finished their breakfast and went on to town, while the three cowboys sat down on the ranch-house porch and rolled fresh cigarets.

"Do yuh know what I think?" asked Monte.

Nobody seemed to care what he thought, but he continued—

"I think that Bud Daley was the one that shot Red."

"All right," said Brent Allard. "It's a free country, Monte. I told yuh before we went there that we was monkeyin' with dynamite. But Red got a lot of drinks under his belt——"

"He didn't get any more than the rest of us did," interrupted Monte.

"I know it. But Red got braver than the rest of us. I told yuh what would happen. Red thought we could frame up a scare for them two jaspers; but yuh see what happened, don't yuh."

"Aw-w-w, ——!" snorted Frank Asher. "You can't make me believe that one of them was guardin' the place. They didn't know we was comin' out there. I'll betcha that Bud was the one what busted up the party for Red."

"Here comes Mesa," said Monte, pointing down the road, where a lone horseman was riding swiftly toward the ranch.

They watched him ride in at the gate and come straight to the porch, where he dismounted and joined them.

"Red died a couple of hours ago," he stated wearily. "He never got conscious."

Monte swore softly and rolled a fresh cigaret, while Mesa Caldwell helped himself to Monte's tobacco.

"Lavelle thinks it was Bud Daley that done it," said Mesa. "I was talkin' to Lavelle a while ago. Met the sheriff and his deputy and told them about it. I reckon most everybody thinks that Bud done the shootin'."

"That's where yo're all wrong," insisted Brent Allard. "If you —— fools would only believe me, when I tell yuh that them two fellers, Hartley and Stevens, are——"

"Aw, stop croakin', Brent!" wailed Monte. "My ——, yo're always lookin' for spooks! If yo're so scared of them two, why don'tcha pull yore freight out of here?"

"Gimme my time, then," said Brent quickly. "I'm plumb willin' to go, Monte. I tell yuh, there ain't nothin' but trouble, where yuh find them two snake-hunters.. I remember the time they——"

"Aw, hire a hall!" exploded Frank Asher, and Allard subsided, growling and shaking his head.

"So Lavelle thinks that Bud Daley shot Red, does he?" queried Mont." I wonder if Lavelle thinks that his opinions are worth a —— of a lot? They'd have a sweet time convicting Bud of it, wouldn't they? Personally, I think the least said about it the better it will be for all of us. Bud's likely got a horse and a gun by this time, and he'll be a hard jigger to corral."

"We'll likely find out," grinned Mesa knowingly. "Lavelle is goin' to turn us all over to the sheriff—to assist him in gettin' Bud Daley."

The three cowboys stared at Mesa, who seemed to enjoy their silent expressions.

"Mesa Caldwell, are you lyin' to us?" demanded Monte.

"Cross m' heart and hope t' die, if I am. The country is offerin' two thousand for Bud, dead or alive, and the bank antes a thousand. As soon as our friend Dug Breed gets back to Modoc, Lavelle is goin' to offer him our services."

"Well," said Brent Allard slowly, "Cleve Lavelle and Dug Breed can go plumb to ——, as far as I'm concerned."

Allard set his jaw tightly and hitched up his belt.

"Scared?" queried Mesa grinning.

"Yeah, I'm scared."

"Of one man?"

"No, not of one man. Bud Daley don't count. I liked Bud and I still like him. Them two punchers ——"

"Aw, they've got yore goat," laughed Monte, and the other two punchers joined in the laugh at Allard's fears.

"All right," Allard was not interested in their sarcasm.

He knew what he knew, and their joking would not change him.

"They ain't got nothin' to do with us," pointed out Mesa.

"Not until we try to put the deadwood on Bud Daley," agreed Allard. "They're friends of Bud Daley, that's a cinch; and I don't intend to give them a chance to work agin' me. I'll take my pay and hunt for another range—it's safer."

"You won't find a safer place to work than for Lavelle." Thus Monte, who did not want to lose Allard.

"Mebbe we better go over and have a talk with these bad *hombres*,"suggested Mesa, laughing. "Would they recognize yuh, Brent?"

Allard squinted at Mesa, but did not answer. He was not going to commit himself.

"We could ride over there," continued Mesa. "It would be four against two. It wouldn't be hard to start somethin', especially if they recognized you and made some remarks."

"Any ti-i-ime," drawled Allard, shaking his head quickly. "Not for mine, Mesa. You fellers trot right along and start somethin' with them two; but leave me here. Mebbe they'd recognize me. Hartley, the tall one, ain't got a bad memory for faces. And—" Allard squinted seriously and rubbed his stubbled chin—"I'd like to bet that he knows more about why and how things have been done since he showed up than the men that done 'em."

"Yo're crazy," declared Monte.

"Jist like a li'l fox," grinned Allard. "I love my own hide so much that I'll go into a hole any old time that the runnin' ain't good."

"Well," observed Mesa, "mebbe yo're right, Brent. If yuh feel like yo're runnin' into bad luck, it's a good thing to lay off the game for a while. Talkin' about luck, Lavelle got a trimmin' at stud agin' last night. Sody Slavin and a gambler from Burke sure cleaned out Lavelle.

"Sody went in on a shoe-string and came out with enough to buy a train-load of cows. Lavelle almost lost his shirt. That bird from Burke and Sody took turns throwin' the hook into Lavelle, and I'm tellin' you that the Rest Ye All is danged badly bent."

"They must 'a' been loaded with luck," observed Monte. "Lavelle is usually awful lucky at his own game. But he's been gettin' hit hard lately. I wonder if his luck is slippin'?"

"Sure it's slippin'!" Brent Allard spoke with conviction. "The minute I heard them two names, I knew——"

"You poor fool!" Monte swung around angrily. "What in —— would they have to do with Cleve Lavelle's luck? You talk like a sick buzzard, Brent."

"He's sure superstitious," laughed Mesa.

But there was a note of uneasiness in Mesa's voice. He, too, believed in omens.

"I dunno," continued Mesa. "Somethin' is wrong with Lavelle's luck—and Lavelle knows it, too. He's sour-balled, I tell yuh. I watched him playin', and he was as nervous as an old woman. Kept kinda lickin' his lips. He got sore at Sody Slavin, 'cause Sody kidded him about his bad luck. Why, I even seen Lavelle kinda countin' his chips."

"Countin' his chips, eh?" grunted Allard. "That's a jinx."

"Mebbe," said Monte thoughtfully, "he was workin' one jinx against the other. Sometimes that works."

Which proved that Monte Sells was not proof against superstition. Brent Allard laughed at Monte's opinion and stalked off the porch toward the bunk-house.

"—— him!" muttered Monte, after Allard had passed out of earshot. "Him and his —— superstition make me tired. We'll all be jumpin' around with bad nerves if he don't quit it.' '

"Well, let's go and take a look at these two pelicans," suggested Mesa. "We don't have to choose 'em, if we don't want to."

AND while the boys of the 76A argued about them, Hashknife and Sleepy rode in at the JM ranch in time for breakfast. Sody Slavin, with wealth in every pocket, greeted them like long-lost brothers and insisted on telling them how he had helped clean out Cleve Lavelle.

"It was like takin' straw away from the

crippled cow," explained Sody. "I seen him quit cold, when he had me beat in sight. And I went in with ten dollars. Man, I never seen a game like that. I'd take a wallop at Lavelle and then that gambler from Burke would paste him for a bushel of chips. We sure seesawed him out of a lot of *dinero*."

"Yuh ought to have a little compassion," said Hashknife.

"Not me." Sody shook his head. "I hookum cow, when I git m' feet rammed into a lucky spot. Lavelle has cleaned me plenty of times, but I'm more'n even with him this time."

Ma Miller welcomed them to breakfast and demanded the latest news from Black Wells.

"I used to know Black Wells pretty well," she laughed. "When we used to trail our cows over there, I handled the chuck-wagon."

"And there never was a puncher late for a meal," declared Uncle Jimmy proudly. "Ma sure can make food. Black Wells ain't much, is she?"

"Not much," grinned Hashknife. "This here food don't look like what they feed yuh over there."

"They didn't like us," grinned Sleepy, balancing a whole fried egg on his knife-blade. "They don't fuss over strangers."

Sody grinned encouragingly. He felt that something worth while had happened over there and wondered how they had found out that Black Wells did not like them. Mrs. Daley came from up-stairs and smiled a welcome to them. She sat down at the table and waited for the conversation to resume.

"Do any of you folks know a puncher over there named Jud? He's kinda pointed-faced, with squirrel-teeth, and looks like he never lived in a country where there was soap."

"That's Jud Mahley," said Uncle Jimmy. "I betcha that's who yuh mean. His eyes are awful close together—kinda makes him look like he's cross-eyed."

"That's him," grinned Hashknife. "And there's the proprietor of the Welcome saloon. He's——"

"That's 'Bumpy' Dickenson," laughed Sody. "Got a bald head, with bumps all over it, ain't he?"

"That's the whip-poor-will," admitted Sleepy. "Nice sort of a gent."

"With a reverse-English!" exploded Uncle Jimmy. "There ain't a bigger crook in the world than Dickenson."

"Unless it's Jud Mahley," amended Sody. "He ain't only crooked, but he's lucky."

"Sody shot at him once," grinned Uncle Jimmy, "and Sody has been sore ever since."

"Danged right!" snorted Sody. "I'd bet forty dollars agin' a cigaret paper that it was Jud Mahley. He was usin' a runnin'-iron on a calf, back toward Crooked Cañon. I had a .45-70 and a lot of them —— D. C. ca'tridges that got into this country, because they was cheap.

"Anyway, I got a good runnin' shot at that jasper, and I'd 'a' handed him a harp; but the head blowed off the shell, knocked —— out of my Winchester, and I couldn't see to spit for twenty minutes."

Hashknife laughed at Sody's disgusted expression. He knew just how Sody had felt at the time.

"So Jud used to be over here, eh?" he asked.

"Yeah, he sure did," grunted Sody. "He worked around for the different outfits. Thinks he's a gun-man. He sure rattled his hocks out of the Modoc hills."

"Aw, he comes back once in a while," said Uncle Jimmy. "I seen him in Modoc a few weeks ago."

"And yuh didn't tell me?" Sody grew indignant to think that this information had been withheld.

"You still want to kill him?" asked Hashknife.

"Yo're —— right I do!"

"Well, you've got my permission," laughed Sleepy. "But you've got to beat me to him. I've picked him, cowboy."

They got up from the breakfast table and moved into the living-room, while Ma and Mrs. Daley cleared away the breakfast table.

Uncle Jimmy signaled Hashknife to follow him outside, and they walked to the far corner of the porch.

"Did yuh find out anythin'?" queried Uncle Jimmy.

Hashknife shook his head slowly.

"Nothin' that would show who sold them cows of Buds. They're a tight-lipped outfit over there, Uncle Jimmy."

"——, yes," thoughtfully, "I dunno whether we'll ever find out the truth of it all. I hate to think that Bud is guilty."

"I wish to gosh I could have a talk with Bud."

"He wouldn't talk when he was in jail, Hartley."

"He'd talk to me or I'd knock —— out of him."

"Uh-huh." Uncle Jimmy seemed a bit dubious of Hashknife's ability to do this.

"I've got a hunch that Bud's cows were shipped out of Black Wells," said Hashknife, "but that's as far as my hunch goes. This Jud Mahley has charge of the loadin' corrals over there, but he won't talk. Have yuh heard how that Red Blair is gettin' along?"

Uncle Jimmy shook his head. He was not interested in Blair.

"That was kind of a funny deal," observed Hashknife. "Do yuh suppose Bud had anythin' to do with it?"

"I don't think so." Uncle Jimmy sucked thoughtfully on his old pipe. "Red Blair and Bud never had any trouble that I know about."

"Blair works for Lavelle, don't he? Who else is in that outfit?"

Uncle Jimmy named over the other cowboys of the 76A. Hashknife listened thoughtfully, squinting his eyes away from the smoke of his cigaret.

"Brent Allard, eh? Kinda sad-lookin' jasper, with a lock of hair that's always in his eyes?"

"Yeah." Uncle Jimmy looked up quickly. "You know him?"

Hashknife grinned softly and threw away his cigaret.

"I know a Brent Allard, and I'd like to see if this is the one. Does Bud Daley know Jud Mahley?"

"Yeah, he knows him. Everybody around here knows Jud. There's a fat reward out for Bud. The country offers two thousand dollars, dead or alive; and the bank says he's worth a thousand to them."

"That's a lot of money, Uncle Jimmy."

The old man nodded slowly.

"Yeah—dead or alive," he said sadly and jerked his head toward the door. "I ain't told May. She's got enough to worry about without knowin' that the law is willin' to pay for Bud's carcass. I sure feel sorry for her, Hartley. She's jist a kid.

"Her and Bud was jist gittin' a good start, when he got hit with all the troubles in the world. I got sore as —— at Bud, 'cause he wouldn't talk to nobody. I went down there and argued with him, but he didn't seem to give a —— what they done to him. Why, that —— fool seemed pleased when the judge sentenced him."

Uncle Jimmy snorted his disgust and knocked the dottle from his pipe against his spurred heel.

"Wouldn't even talk to May," added Hashknife.

"Not to anybody. It looked bad to the jury. What could a lawyer do in a case like that? They've got to know whether yo're guilty or not, before they can prove that yuh ain't. But they never did know about Bud."

"That's the one big question," observed Hashknife. "If we only knew why he wouldn't talk."

HASHKNIFE did not get a chance to talk with Mrs. Daley before they left the JM ranch. He and Sleepy had ridden all night and were too weary to think of much except a chance to stretch out and sleep.

They went back to Bud's ranch-house, stabled and fed their horses and slept until mid-afternoon. Bud had cleaned out their food supply, which had not been replenished; so they decided to go to Modoc and eat.

At the restaurant they heard that Red Blair was dead, but it did not seem to have excited the town greatly. They met the sheriff, who seemed disposed to talk, or rather to ask questions; so they got away from him as gently as possible and went over to the Rest Ye All.

Lavelle was behind the bar, talking to the bartender, but turned as they came up. He squinted at them closely and smiled as he placed a bottle and glasses on the bar.

"We'll have some see-gars," said Hashknife, shoving the bottle aside and leaning against the bar.

"That stuff is ten years old," stated Lavelle.

"Let her live to a ripe old age," grinned Hashknife. "We got hold of some bad liquor over at Black Wells, and it kinda cured us of the drink habit. A shot of that stuff is the best temperance lecture I ever attended."

"Strong?" queried Lavelle.

"Well, I took one drink and it affected the moon," grinned Sleepy. "And that's no danged imagination either."

Lavelle laughed and handed out a box of dusty-looking cigars.

"I remember that you said you was going to Black Wells," he said indifferently. "It used to be a wild place a few years ago."

"I'll bet they're wild yet," laughed Sleepy. "I wrote my initials on the back-bar of the Welcome saloon with a six-gun."

"You did?"

Lavelle grew interested and would like to have heard more, but Sleepy decided that he had told quite enough. Sleepy dropped his cigar into a cuspidor and began rolling a cigaret.

"Did you hear that Red Blair died?" asked Lavelle.

"Three times," said Hashknife. "First two times I didn't believe it, but three times is a charm. Did he ever wake up?"

Lavelle shook his head. He did not like the way Hashknife treated the subject, but could hardly see where it would be policy to chide him for his attitude.

"There's three thousand reward for Bud Daley."

Hashknife grinned at Lavelle's statement but suddenly sobered and leaned across the bar toward Lavelle.

"I hear you've lost yore luck, Lavelle?"

Not a muscle of the gambler's face moved for several moments. Then his eyelids twitched slightly, and his lips parted.

"What do you mean, Hartley?" he asked coldly.

"I just heard that Sody Slavin busted the stud-game last night. I hear that you quit cold, with the best cards in sight."

Lavelle laughed, but without mirth. Hashknife was looking him straight in the eyes, and the gambler turned his head away.

"Well, he didn't break me," he said slowly, "and as far as quitting—I know enough to quit when I'm beat, Hartley."

Hashknife grinned thoughtfully and tossed away his cigar. He knew that Lavelle was mad, and wondered just how far he could go with his baiting. Lavelle had started to go around the end of the bar, when Hashknife turned to him again.

"What's yore particular hoodoo, Lavelle?"

"Hoodoo?" Lavelle stopped and looked queerly at Hashknife. Then he came back.

"What did you mean by that?" he asked softly.

"Yore bad-luck medicine," explained Hashknife, although he knew that Lavelle understood the question.

"I've knowed a lot of superstitious gamblers," continued Hashknife after a moment. "They believed in signs and all that kinda stuff, and I wondered what yore pet hoodoo was, thasall."

Lavelle laughed shortly and shook his head.

"Not me, Hartley. I believe in good luck and bad luck, but I have no charms to bring me luck."

"No, I didn't think yuh did," said Hashknife.

Lavelle looked quickly at him, but did not reply. Sleepy was itching to know what it was all about, but he knew, deep down in his heart, that Hashknife was not talking in vain. Lavelle walked from behind the bar and went toward the back room without another word, while Hashknife laughed silently and rested his elbows on the bar.

A moment later Monte Sells, Frank Asker, Mesa Caldwell and Brent Allard came, rattling their spurs and arguing over the fact that the sheriff wanted them to start on their man-hunt today. Monte glanced quickly at Hashknife and Sleepy and stepped aside to see what Brent Allard would do.

Brent was in the rear, crowding in behind Caldwell, who also stepped aside, leaving Brent almost within reach of Hashknife. He looked up and stopped in his tracks. No one spoke. Brent's two hands had been against Caldwell's back, and they remained in that same position for several moments. Then they slowly relaxed, but he kept them above his belt-line.

Hashknife was grinning at him, and a foolish grin came to Brent Allard's lips.

"Hyah, Allard?" said Hashknife easily. "Long time I no see yuh. Wyomin', wasn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Allard wet his lips with a dry tongue and cleared his throat raspingly. "I—I come there from Oklyhomy."

"That's right," nodded Hashknife. "I remember hearin' that the sheriff run yuh out of Oklahoma. Boot-leggin' to the Injuns, wasn't it, Allard?"

Allard grinned foolishly; Monte snorted disgustedly. He felt that Allard was too frightened to resent an insult. Hashknife's eyes flashed to Monte, considered him coldly for a moment, and turned back to Allard.

"You workin' for the 76 A, ain't yuh, Allard?"

"Yeah. I've been here quite a while, Hartley."

"Wasn't it one of yore outfit that got shot out where we're livin'? We packed him in. We jist found out that he died."

"Yeah," said Monte harshly, "and we're lookin' for the man that shot him."

Hashknife squinted at Monte and at the rest of the 76A outfit. They shifted uneasily under his steady, half-contemptuous gaze. They remembered that Allard had declared that Hartley could read their minds, and four pairs of eyes shifted uneasily.

"You're lookin' for that man, are yuh?" queried Hashknife slowly.

"You're —— right!" grunted Monte.

"So are we," declared Hashknife. "Come and have a drink."

The invitation was unexpected. For a moment they hesitated, but only for a moment. They had expected trouble. Allard laughed nervously, but was the first one to reach the bar, where he filled his glass with a shaky hand.

"Here's hopin' we find him," said Hashknife seriously.

"If you're huntin' for him," said Allard nervously, "you won't need hopes."

They drank deeply, except Hashknife and Sleepy, who took cigars. Monte grinned at their choice, but the grin left his face when Hashknife said seriously—

"We was over at Black Wells yesterday, and Jud Mahley told us to give yuh his regards."

"The —— he did!" blurted Monte. "Can'tcha think of anythin' funnier than that to say?"

Hashknife laughed softly and shook his head. He wanted to find out if Jud Mahley was a friend of the 76A boys—and he found out quickly.

"Mahley never meant it," laughed Caldwell.

"We've got a —— of a job ahead of us," said Frank Asher disgustedly. "We're goin' to help the sheriff find Bud Daley."

"That'll be quite a chore, I'd imagine." Hashknife hunched backward against the bar and proceeded to crumble the cigar between his long fingers.

"I've knowed Bud a long time, and if he ain't changed, you'll have to bring him in on a stretcher."

"And we ain't got a —— thing agin' him," complained Brent Allard. "The law don't mean nothin'."

"It never did, to you, did it?" laughed Hashknife.

"Aw, you know what I mean," protested Allard. "Bud's all right."

"He's all wrong," said Hashknife. "The danged fool never tried to get away. That bandit had to almost throw him off the train."

The 76A boys exchanged quick glances, as if questioning each other. Monte half-smiled and moved in a trifle closer. It was evident that he did not want any one, except those immediately concerned, to hear his question.

"You got a good look at the two men who took Bud away from Dug Breed, didn't yuh?" he asked.

Hashknife nodded seriously, but his face broke into a grin.

"Yeah, we got a good look—especially into the muzzle of their guns. They were masked, yuh know."

"I *sabe* that part of it," nodded Monte. "It's kinda hard to describe a masked man. But I thought that mebbe yuh was able to kinda pay attention to their size and—you know what I mean."

"Didn't they say anythin'?" asked Allard.

"One of 'em did," said Hashknife. "But I reckon he changed his voice quite a lot. The other one said nothin'. If I remember right, they were both kinda tall. One was kinda skinny—the one that didn't talk—but the other one wasn't fat."

"That's a good description," stated Mesa Caldwell.

"It must 'a' been quite a good sized gang," observed Sleepy, "and it looks like they intended to take Bud away from the sheriff. They never touched any of the other passengers—never even went into the cars."

Monte scratched his chin thoughtfully and motioned for the bartender to fill up their glasses again.

"The express robbery must 'a' been done by tenderfeet," grinned Hashknife. "They never got a cent for their trouble."

"I dunno what they'd expect to get on a branch railroad." Thus Sleepy wisely. "They never carry money."

"Sometimes they do," said Monte. "The mines at Dixon ship bullion from the Kalura, and the money for a big pay-roll comes in from the bank at Burke."

"They was probably figurin' on that

pay-roll money," observed Hashknife. "Somebody must 'a' got the wrong dope."

"Yeah, they must have," agreed Monte dryly.

In a few minutes Charley Morse came in and told them that Breed was in need of their services. Hashknife and Sleepy watched them all ride out of town, heading into the hills, with the intention of looking through the Crooked Cañon country.

THE SUN was nearly down when Hashknife and Sleepy rode in at the ranch again and found Mrs. Daley and Dinah Blewette there. Dinah had driven her down there in the buck-board after some clothes she had forgotten to take with her.

Dug Breed and man-hunters had crossed the road just ahead of them, and Mrs. Daley questioned Hashknife as to whether some one had given the sheriff information about Bud's hiding-place. Hashknife assured her that no one seemed to know just where Bud was located, but that Breed was making the search on general principles.

She seemed to gather a certain amount of satisfaction from this, but she knew that evading the posse would only make him safe for the time being. Dinah took no part in the conversation; being content to nod or shake his head.

Mrs. Daley gathered up what articles she desired and was putting them into a battered telescope valise, when there came the sound of a running horse and a muttered curse, and a man came up the steps. He flung himself into the doorway, leaning heavily against his elbow, swinging a six-shooter in his right hand.

It was Bud Daley, unkempt, unshaven; his face drawn and haggard. Hashknife had taken a step toward him, but Bud's leveled gun caused him to stop quickly.

"Bud, don't yuh know me?" asked Hashknife.

Bud stared at him, licking his dry lips.

"Good ——! Hashknife Hartley!" Bud's voice was a croak. "And Sleepy Stevens! Where did you come from?"

His gun-hand waved and dropped to his side weakly.

"Bud, you've been hit, ain't yuh?" Hashknife crossed quickly to him, as Bud lurched forward.

"In the leg," breathed Bud. "The posse is close behind me."

Sleepy quickly closed the door behind Bud, who sank down in a chair. May, her face white with fear, threw an arm around Bud's shoulder and began crying.

Hashknife ran to a window and scanned the hills, which were already dimming in the fading light.

"How far behind yuh is that posse, Bud?" he asked.

"Close," panted Bud. "I think they knew I was headin' home."

"Where did they hit yuh?" queried Sleepy. "In the leg?"

"Yeah. Through my thigh, I think. It's bleedin' quite a lot. They've got me, I guess. I had a rifle; but it wouldn't do me no good to kill 'em. Can't kill everybody, yuh know. Ha-ha-ha!"

Bud laughed from sheer weakness, but there was no mirth in it.

"Don't, Buddie," begged his wife. "Don't laugh like that. We'll take you to a doctor."

"And from there to the pen," said Bud wearily. "Anyway, it's better than dodgin' in the hills. It's a losin' game. But, Hashknife, where did you fellers come from? I can't believe it's you two."

"It's us all right," said Hashknife, his face glued to the window pane.

The posse had come out on the sky-line of a hill, about five hundred yards away and were bunched, as they debated.

Just away from the front porch stood Bud's horse, one foot on the dragging reins, its head down as it panted wearily from its long run. The buggy team was tied near the back of the house, out of sight of the sheriff and posse.

Hashknife turned from the window. Sleepy had cut away part of Bud's overall clad leg and was trying to stop the flow of blood. Hashknife examined it quickly and slapped Bud on the shoulder.

"It went plumb through, Bud. You don't need a doctor; we'll fix it up ourselves."

DUG BREED was highly elated, but still cautious. He knew that Bud was in that house, but getting him out might be a different matter; hence the deliberation on the hill top.

"He's hit, I tell yuh," insisted Charley Morse, "I could tell the way he was ridin'—one foot out of his stirrup."

"That's right," admitted Breed. "He's plugged; but that makes him a bad *hombre* to drag out of a hole. If he wasn't hurt, I don't think he'd hole up at home. Kinda funny he didn't shoot back at us, though."

"Nothin' funny about that," snorted Monte. "Bud ain't no danged fool, Dug. He knows too much to waste ammunition on flyin' targets. From now on, he'll shoot—and he's a good shot, too."

Breed nodded, as he squinted at the house below them. Then:

"We'll surround the place. Monte, you and Caldwell swing to the left and work into that old washout over there; Frank can watch the front, while me and Charley and Brent can swing to the right and work in back of the barn and corrals."

"You've overlooked another bet," said Brent Allard quickly. "There's Hartley and Stevens to look out for."

Breed squinted at Allard and back at the house.

"Do yuh think they'd back Bud's play?"

"You'd be a —— fool to take a chance on 'em not doin' it. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Uh-huh." Breed deliberated, but shook his head stubbornly.

"We'll go ahead with our program. Better move fast, 'cause a movin' object is harder to hit. Let's go."

Swiftly they separated and began their encircling movement. Frank Asher rode straight down the hill, with the intention of reaching a thicket of greasewood about three hundred yards from the house, but he had only gone a short distance, when he drew his gun and sent two shots into the air.

A man had run from the front door of the ranch-house—a man who limped badly. He caught the horse and mounted slowly. Breed had heard the shots and drew rein, swinging up his rifle. His horse lunged badly on the steep side-hill, making it impossible for him to draw a bead; so he dismounted and began shooting.

But the rider was wasting no time in seeing where the shots were coming from. He swung his horse around the corner of the house, galloped straight across the open ranch-house yard, hurdled the fence and bored straight into the hills. The encircling movement had failed.

Breed swore bitterly and mounted again, racing ahead as he stuffed shells into the loading-gate of his rifle. Monte Sells and Mesa Caldwell were riding swiftly along the slope to the left of the ranch-house, while Frank Asher swung wide and followed in the wake of Breed and the other two riders.

And far ahead of them rode the quarry, riding into the dusk of the hills, holding a straight line toward the Crooked Cañon country. Mile after mile reeled away behind them. It was almost dark now. Breed scowled at the fading light as he roweled his weary horse to greater efforts.

Suddenly he threw up his head and laughed triumphantly. Monte and Caldwell, better mounted than the rest, had caused the rider to swing farther to the right, and Breed had caught a glimpse of him, cutting around the side of a cañon, heading toward the bottom.

"Got him, by ——!" swore Breed.

He yelled shrilly at Morse and Brent Allard and waved at Frank Asher. Swiftly they gathered around him, their horses blowing heavily.

"We've got him, boys!" panted Breed. "He's headed into that blind cañon just ahead of us. All we've got to do is to smoke him out. C'mon."

"Bud wouldn't head into a blind cañon," protested Allard.

"Well, he did," said Breed laughing. "He didn't know that I seen him, and he thinks that's the last place we'd ever look for him."

A blind cañon is one of those freaks of nature; like an alley, which ends in a blank wall. Usually the sides are precipitious, as is the end. Even the wild things shun them as they would a trap.

The entrance to this one looked harmless enough, sloping away gently to the bottom; but further along the sides reared higher and higher, impossible of foot-hold. Monte and Caldwell came in from the opposite side and the whole posse met at the mouth of the trap where they stopped to rest their horses.

"He can't get away," declared Monte, staring into the gloom of the cañon. "I've been in there, and I know that you'd have to have wings to get out. But how did Bud happen to run in there? He knows this place as well as we do."

Breed laughed and dismounted to tighten his cinch.

"That's where he tried to outsmart us, Monte. He figured that we'd never look for him here. It was lucky that I seen him headin' down here. We'll move in to where the sides break straight up and bottle him up. It would be dangerous to move in on him in the dark. He's hurt, I think; and a night up there won't make him any more active than the law allows."

Breed swung back on his horse and they moved ahead. Suddenly they stopped. A rider was coming slowly out of the narrow neck of the cañon. Breed threw up his rifle, but the rider did not pay any attention to it. He was looking up at the sides of the cañon. Then he moved in closer; close enough for them to see that it was Hashknife Hartley.

Breed swore hollowly and lowered his gun. Allard laughed nervously, a chuckling laugh of vindication. Hashknife rode up to them, his face serious, as he motioned back toward the far end of the cañon.

"Say," he remarked easily, "that —— cañon's blind."

"Huh!" Breed crowded the disgust of his soul into one grunt. The rest of the posse merely nodded.

"Yessir, it's blind," continued Hashknife. "A feller could never get out that way."

Then he seemed to consider the posse for the first time.

"You fellers goin' in that way? Don't do it."

Breed spluttered angrily for several moments before his tongue finally shaped words.

"Say, what in —— do yuh think you're doin'? You—huh!"

"Me?" queried Hashknife innocently. "Whatcha mean?"

"You know —— well what I meant! I've got a good notion to arrest you."

"Yeah?" Hashknife seemed amused. "Why don'tcha, Breed?"

Breed looked around at his posse as if trying to seek an answer, but he found them grinning foolishly. Brent Allard seemed almost convulsed with mirth, and it angered Breed.

"What the —— tickles you so —— much Allard?"

"Wall," laughed Allard, "I told you you'd be a —— fool to overlook Hartley."

"Yeah!" Breed snorted and looked back at Hartley, who was grinning softly and offering his sack of tobacco to Monte.

"I reckon we better call it a day," observed Caldwell. "I know I've had all the exercise I need, and my horse twisted two shoes off on that scab-rock below here."

Breed swung his horse around and led them back out of the cañon to the open hills, where he stopped and faced Hashknife.

"Hartley," he said, "I won't forget this. You made a monkey out of me and my posse."

"I'm sorry," said Hashknife soberly. "I didn't mean for yuh to ever catch me; but that danged cañon ruined it."

"How about goin' back to the ranch," suggested Morse.

"Not my gang," said Monte firmly. "If Bud stayed there while we ran the heads off our broncs, he ain't there now."

"Stevens would see that Bud was taken care of," laughed Allard.

"All right!" snapped Breed, "It's too late to do anythin' tonight anyway."

He swung his horse to the left and they headed across the dusky hills toward Modoc town while Hashknife rode alone down the hills toward the Triangle-D, grinning into the night.

IV

THAT same evening Cleve Lavelle stood near one of his roulette tables, which was losing heavily. His face was as expressionless as the face of a savage, but his eyes shifted nervously, as the dealer paid out on nearly every turn of the wheel.

He knew that every one was talking about his run of bad luck, and, like a flock of buzzards, they had come to the kill. He turned away from the roulette and walked to a stud game. Mediocre players were bucking the game, and nearly every one of them had an array of red, white and blue chips in front of them.

Lavelle walked to his private office at the rear and sat down alone, chewing savagely on his cigar. Alone, his features relaxed and he swore softly to himself.

"If this keeps up, I'll be flat broke in a short time," he muttered to himself.

Then he threw his cigar aside and paced the length of the room.

Came a knock on the door, and he wheeled quickly. It was Dug Breed. He squinted at Lavelle and came to the center of the room, where he leaned on a table.

"Well, what luck?" queried Lavelle uneasily.

It was not often that Dug Breed came to his private office, and he felt that Breed must have a good reason for it now.

And with little omission, Breed told Lavelle of running Bud Daley to cover, only to have him escape them. Lavelle listened in silence to the telling, a speculative expression on his face. Then he laughed shortly; an ugly laugh.

"Breed, you are a mighty poor sheriff," he declared.

"All right." Breed shrugged his shoulders. "It was just a case of mistakin' Hartley for Bud Daley, thasall."

"That's all," nodded Lavelle. "You had your chance, and missed."

"Didn't miss entirely, Lavelle. Bud was hit."

"Oh, yes, I suppose so." Lavelle was sarcastic, and it nettled Breed.

"Well, it was just a case of Hartley bein' smarter than I was," admitted Breed.

Lavelle laughed at Breed's admission, but grew serious.

"It's too —— bad you didn't plug him by mistake."

"I was mad enough to plug him on purpose, Lavelle."

"Well, what are you going to do next, Breed?"

"Search me. I'm goin' to watch Hartley and Stevens, for one thing. They know where Bud is, and sooner or later they'll lead me to him. Next time I won't be fooled."

"You better not," said Lavelle coldly. "You make another mistake like that, and you'll not be the next sheriff of Modoc."

Breed lifted his eyebrows slightly and backed slowly to the door, where he stood and looked intently at Lavelle.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" demanded Lavelle.

"I was just thinkin'," said Breed slowly. "They say that you've lost your luck, and I was wonderin' if it would affect you politically."

Lavelle came toward him, a scowl on his face.

"What do you mean, Breed?" he snarled.

"It takes money to run politics—even in a county as small in population as this, Lavelle."

"Don't let that bother you, Breed. I'll be leading the parade next election, and don't you forget it. You either ride with me or you walk alone. Those cheap gamblers out there are only winning chicken-feed."

"Yeah—all right." Breed turned and opened the door. "I'll see how things go, Lavelle."

"Just a moment," said Lavelle, coming closer. "If you need any help, my boys will be free to ride with you."

"And a —— of a lot of good they'll do me!" snorted Breed. "When Hartley laughed at me, they laughed with him. *Adios.*"

Breed slammed the door shut, leaving Lavelle staring after him. Then Lavelle went back to the table and selected a fresh cigar from a box. For a long time he chewed on the unlighted weed, his face drawn in a heavy frown.

"Breaking me, are they?" he muttered. "My luck is all gone, eh? I put him in office, but he'd quit me in a minute—the coyote."

Lavelle laughed softly, bitterly, as he crumpled the cigar in his clenched hand. From the gambling-room came the sounds of laughter, the rattling of chips, the drone of a dealer's voice. Business was in full sway, and Lavelle knew that the Rest Ye All was losing money every minute.

He went back to the games, where men jostled each other for a chance to place a bet. None of them paid the slightest attention to Lavelle. His games were on the square—no chance for a fixed wheel, a crooked deal—and they knew it. It was just one of those unaccountable runs of ill-luck in which every game in the house suffered heavily.

The stud game halted temporarily while the dealer came to Lavelle and drew him aside.

"Every chip in the rack gone," he said softly. "My game is about four thousand in the hole right now. I've paid out about two thousand in cash."

"Fill your rack," said Lavelle shortly, and walked away.

The dealer nodded indifferently and went back to his game. Lavelle went to the roulette and studied the play. Men were going in on dollar bets and coming away with a hatful of coins.

He walked over to a draw-poker table and sized up the chips in front of the different players, estimating swiftly. The dealer looked up at him inquiringly, but Lavelle walked away and went to the bar. There was nothing he could do. To close the games would be fatal to his prestige. Men would say that he was a quitter.

Down deep in his heart he wanted to quit, because he knew that he had lost his luck.

Sody Slavin and Uncle Jimmy Miller came in, but did not play. Lavelle knew that Sody had taken a big roll of money out of the place the night before. Other cowboys came rollicking in and added to the noise and smoke of the place. Lavelle turned to the bartender and beckoned him away from the end of the bar, where he was talking to Sody Slavin.

"If anybody wants to see me, I'll be at my room in the hotel."

The bartender nodded.

"Sure, I'll do that."

AS LAVELLE turned toward the door he came face to face with Jud Mahley. The Black Wells cow-puncher paid no attention to Lavelle, but slouched up to the bar and ordered a drink of whisky.

Lavelle studied him from the rear, a look of half-disgust on his face, which he could not conceal. Jud gulped his liquor and turned around, as Lavelle moved up closer to him.

"Hello, Mahley," Lavelle spoke softly.

Mahley's ferret-like eyes shifted quickly around the room, as he returned the greeting.

"What do you know?" queried Lavelle.

"Not a —— thing."

"Not a thing, eh?"

Mahley shook his head. A couple of cowboys had come in close to them and ordered their drinks. Mahley moved aside, drawing his slouchy sombrero farther down over his eyes.

"Couple of fellers come out to Black Wells," he said to Lavelle. "They didn't like the liquor very well, so they shot the winder out of the Welcome saloon and smashed the mirror of the back-bar. That's all the news."

"Who was they?"

One of the cowboys turned his head and looked at Mahley.

"I dunno."

Mahley turned away, as if he did not care to talk about it. The cowboys laughed and went back toward the gambling-room. Sody and Uncle Jimmy came toward the bar, laughing over some incident of the gambling, and Sody moved in beside Mahley.

Lavelle knew of the enmity between Sody and Jud Mahley, and tried to flash a signal to Mahley; but the signal was lost upon every one, except Sody, who saw the action in the mirror.

Quickly he turned his head and looked at the profile of the bad-man from Black Wells. Sody did not believe in arguments. With a sideswipe of his big left hand he caught Mahley a slap full in the nose and mouth.

The sound of the blow could be heard all over the house, but was of such a nature that it did little more than sting and partly daze Mahley. He struck his shoulders against the bar and fairly rebounded, his hat flying over the bar and both hands grasping for a support.

For an instant he seemed incapable of action, but instinct caused him to reach for his holstered gun. Sody grunted with glee, swung his right foot in an arc, catching Mahley's legs just behind the ankles and kicked his feet from under him before his hand had quite gripped the butt of his gun.

The shock of Mahley's downfall shook the Rest Ye All and also took all the fight out of Mahley. He sat on the floor, goggling around, while Sody swiftly disarmed him and tossed the gun over the bar.

"What's the big idea?" queried Lavelle angrily. "What right ——?"

"You backin' this scorpion?" asked Sody, pointing at Mahley.

"No, I'm not. But I don't see——"

"You try and see enough to mind your own business, Lavelle."

Lavelle stepped aside while Mahley got slowly to his feet, looking around as if wondering what had happened to him Then he got a good look at Sody Slavin, and his face reddened with anger.

"Whatcha tryin' to do?" he muttered.

"You've got a lot of nerve to be showin' up around here," said Sody. "If I wasn't tender-hearted I'd unwind you, Mahley. And if you show up here agin, I'll jist about do that. Now you git off the Modoc range and stay off, you brand-buster."

Mahley's right hand felt of the empty holster, and his eyes squinted almost shut. He blinked his little eyes angrily and started to say something, but changed his mind.

"You ain't goin' fast enough to suit me," said Sody. "If I was you I'd be half-way to Black Wells by this time."

"Aw right."

Mahley turned toward the door, and

Sody stared after him. Mahley appeared to be perfectly willing to leave; but at the door he drew a six-shooter from inside his dirty flannel shirt bosom and whirled on Sody.

"—— you, I'll show you!" he snarled, half-sobbing with wrath, as he threw down on Sody

But before he could pull the trigger a man dived through the doorway into him, and he went staggering sideways, the bullet tearing along the wall.

The man who had knocked him sidewise fell to his knees from the rush, leaving Mahley still able to recover for another shot; but another man came through right behind him and was into Mahley with both hands swinging like pistons.

The first man was Hashknife Hartley, the second Sleepy Stevens. Neither man said a word. Hashknife got to his feet in time to see Mahley sway forward and catch one of Sleepy's punches flush on the chin. Then Mr. Mahley of Black Wells folded up like an old shirt and went to sleep. And, without any lost motions, Sleepy picked him up in his arms, staggered to the doorway and threw him bodily into the street.

Sody's altercation with Mahley had drawn quite a crowd, and now they stood open-mouthed and stared at Hashknife and Sleepy. Hashknife dusted off his knees with his hands and grinned slowly. Lavelle had not moved, but now he looked keenly at Hashknife before turning away.

"That was kinda complete," remarked Sody with a sigh of relief. "I'm sure much obliged, gents. You came just in time. Mebbe he ain't a very good shot, but I'm big enough for anybody to hit at that distance."

"You don't need to thank me," grinned Sleepy, blowing on his sore knuckles. "I've been honin' for a crack at that horse hobo. And I sure got my fill. He rattled like a handful of poker-chips when I hit him on the chin, didn't he."

"Mebbe we better take another look at him," suggested Sody. "Yuh never can tell how many more guns he's got with him."

They filed outside and looked around, but there was no sign of Jud Mahley. In the space of two minutes he had recovered from his knockout and had faded from view.

"And I'll betcha he never even stopped to bother with a horse," laughed Sody. "He knows now that Modoc ain't healthy. Let's all go and have a drink."

They went back to the bar. The curious crowd had gone back to the gambling room, leaving only the bartender to applaud them.

"You sure knocked on his gate," he told Sleepy grinning. "I ain't never seen any-body nail 'em sweeter."

"Wasn't he talkin' to Lavelle?" asked Sody.

"Yeah, he was," said the bartender. "Most everybody around here knows Jud Mahley. He's kinda tough, I'd say."

"Well, he got softened up quite a little," laughed Sody. "Let's have another little snifter and then help break Lavelle. Everybody wins from the house these days."

They all trooped into the gambling-room and began laying small bets on the roulette. There was no sign of Lavelle, but there was plenty of talk about the ill-luck of the house. Neither Hashknife nor Sleepy felt inclined to gamble heavily, but preferred to stand by and watch the others buck the games.

Uncle Jimmy tried to get Sody to break away and go home; but the fat cowboy was adding to his bank-roll and did not want to leave any easy money behind.

* * *

TIME passes swiftly when stakes are running high, and it was about two hours after the incident with Jud Mahley when Hashknife, Sleepy and Uncle Jimmy went back into the barroom. They had about decided to ride home and were going to take a farewell drink, when Dug Breed staggered through the doorway.

His face was streaked with blood, as if something with many claws had scratched him, and he was disheveled and covered with dirt. He spat dryly and reached for a glass of whisky which Uncle Jimmy had poured out for his own use. Gulping the liquor at one swallow, he leaned against the bar and swore hoarsely.

"Morse is dead," he croaked, shaking his head painfully. "He never knowed what hit him. I—I——" he felt tenderly of his face—"I reckon I got the drag of the load."

"You sure look like you got somethin'," admitted Hashknife.

"Who killed Morse?" queried Sody wonderingly.

"—— only knows. His horse ran away, and mine won't pack double, so I had to leave him there in the road. Somebody bushwhacked us with a shotgun. I was a little behind Charley. Look at my face!"

"Where did it happen?" asked Hashknife.

"Between here and Bud Daley's ranch just a little beyond where the JM road forks. I couldn't bring Charley in. But he's dead; so it won't matter to him. I've got to find a doctor and take him out there. Lucky it didn't hit me in the eyes."

He turned and staggered outside. The word ran swiftly through the gambling-room and the crowd quit playing to find out the particulars. Some one went to Lavelle's office at the rear and told him what had happened. He added his voice to the rest, and hurried down to the doctor's house to get further particulars from Breed.

No one seemed to be able to figure out just why the sheriff and his deputy should have been ambushed—unless Bud Daley had done it. Hashknife smiled grimly at their conjectures. He knew what had happened or thought he did.

Jud Mahley, smarting over what had happened to him, had secured a shotgun and planted himself beside the road. In the darkness he had mistaken Breed and Morse for Hashknife and Sleepy, never expecting any one except them to ride over that road that night.

And Sleepy had arrived at the same conclusions. He drew Hashknife aside.

"Cowboy, she's a good thing we didn't get there first," he said softly.

Hashknife nodded and they walked outside to their horses.

"Breed and Morse were goin' to the ranch," declared Sleepy. "They knowed we were here; so they thought it might be a good chance to look for Bud."

"And some of them danged fools are blamin' poor Bud," said Hashknife disgustedly. "We know what happened, but we'll never be able to prove it. Still—" he swung into his saddle—"never is a mighty long time, Sleepy."

The murder of Charley Morse shocked even the sensibilities of Modoc. It was so uncalled for, so fiendish, that those who were hard-bitten enough to overlook an ordinary killing longed for a chance to get their hands on the murderer.

Morse had never been popular, but he had never been unpopular. He was soft-spoken, reliable, minded his own business and was an efficient officer. The charge of bird-shot had scattered enough merely to rake Breed's features and drill some little holes in his neck and shoulders.

The shooting had been done at fairly close range, and, from the extent of Morse's wounds, the assassin had fired both barrels. Hashknife and Sleepy had ridden back to town fairly early in the morning and had a talk with Breed, whose face was plentifully decorated with bits of court-plaster.

Breed was frankly worried. It looked to him as if some one was trying to put the sheriff's office out of commission. But he did not have the slightest idea of who had killed Morse. Only fate had put Morse ahead of him that night. A loose cinch, which he had stopped to tighten, caused him to be riding far enough behind to have escaped the force of the shotgun load.

"You were lookin' for Bud, wasn't yuh?" asked Hashknife.

Breed rubbed his speckled face and nodded slowly.

"Yeah, we was, Hartley. I knowed that you and Stevens were here in town; so we rode out there, intendin' to take a good look at Bud's ranch. You foxed us the other day, but I ain't holdin' no hard feelin's toward yuh.

"Bud and me never did hitch. He's a wild sort of a jigger, and just a kid; but he ain't a feller that yuh can dislike a lot. It ain't me that wants him, Hartley; it's what I represent. The law says he's guilty—not me."

Hashknife held out his hand to Breed, who took it wonderingly.

"Yo're kinda human, Breed," said Hashknife warmly "Mebbe I've misunderstood yuh all the time. Let's set down and have a talk."

Hashknife indicated a spot on the board sidewalk and they sat down together, where no one would overhear them.

"You don't think that Bud Daley killed Morse, do yuh?" queried Hashknife.

Breed shook his head quickly.

"No, I don't, Hartley. Bud Daley ain't that kind. Bud would shoot, if he had to, but not from ambush with a shotgun."

Hashknife glanced across the street. Uncle Jimmy and Ma Miller had driven in and were tying their team to a hitch-rack. The hitch-racks were filling up fast. Hashknife grinned and turned to Breed.

"Saturday is always the same in all ranch countries," he observed. "Everybody comes in to trade and tell lies. If it wasn't for Saturday, I'd live in a city."

Breed grinned and nodded. Lavelle came out of the Rest Ye All, spoke to Uncle

Jimmy and Ma for several moments and walked down the street. Hashknife watched him keenly and turned to Breed.

"Funny about Lavelle's luck, ain't it, Breed?"

Breed glanced after Lavelle and nodded slowly, a slight frown on his face.

"Do you believe in luck, Hartley?"

"Yeah." Hashknife nodded slowly. "I believe in it, sheriff; but not the way Lavelle does. He's superstitious; believes in signs and charms, I hear."

"Yeah, he does." Breed laughed shortly. "Most gamblers do."

"They're poor sticks to tie to," declared Hashknife. Breed looked up quickly.

"What do yuh mean, Hartley?"

"Lavelle got you into the sheriff's office, didn't he?"

Breed's face flushed hotly, but he shut his lips tight.

"He thinks the office belongs to him," continued Hashknife easily. "I know how you feel about it." Hashknife dug his heel into the dirt and squinted thoughtfully, as he said—

"Breed, did you ever wonder what became of Bud's cattle?"

"Yeah; but I never figured it out. Bud could 'a' bunched 'em and taken 'em to Black Wells. Lavelle thinks that Bud done it. Yuh see, Bud owes Lavelle five thousand dollars, and Lavelle thinks that Bud sold his cattle and lied about 'em bein' stole; so he won't have to pay it back."

"And who do yuh think them two men were that took Bud away from you that night on the train?"

Breed shut his lips tight and shook his head. Lavelle was riding up the street from the livery-stable. He had changed to boots and chaps, and sat his horse as easily as any cowpuncher in the country. He nodded to Hashknife and Breed, as he passed them and rode out of town.

"I don't know who them two men were," said Breed thoughtfully. "But it strikes me that the hold-up was just a blind to stop the train and release Bud."

Hashknife laughed and began rolling a cigaret. Breed looked curiously at him and said—

"Does it strike you funny?"

"It's so danged mixed up, Breed. If it was only a blind, why did they dynamite that safe in the express car. Their intentions were good, don'tcha think?"

"I dunno. Still, it looks like it might 'a' been just—well, I dunno watcha call it. I can't imagine who the robbers were."

Breed shook his head seriously, but turned to Hashknife with a grin.

"That jasper that made me unlock Bud's handcuffs was a queer jigger. When he found that you didn't have any money, he gave yuh some."

"Cold-blooded bluff," said Hashknife grinning. "Gentleman bandit stuff. Wanted to show that he was plumb salty, thasall. Well, we don't know much, do we, Breed? Now let's talk about the bank robbery.

"That happened late at night. Somebody knowed that the cashier was workin' late; so he must 'a' waited for the cashier to come out of the door. Then he jist about shoved a gun in his ribs and hurried him back inside.

"Mebbe he made the cashier open the vault. Then he pops the cashier over the head with his gun. He thinks that the cashier is cool for a spell; so he proceeds to loot the vault. About that time, the cashier wakes up and makes a break for the door.

"This robber gent takes a shot at the cashier, misses him, busts the window and kills Sody's bronc. The next shot gets the cashier dead center. Then this man takes his plunder and makes a getaway. Ain't that about the ticket?"

"That's the way I see it," nodded Breed, "I found a rosette off Bud's chaps on the vault floor, kinda mingled with some loose money. I'd know that rosette anywhere. At daylight, I beat it for the ranch and found Bud jist pullin' in. He's sure been ridin' a lot that night, and he won't tell where. His wife don't know, except that he ain't been home.

"We do know that Bud got kinda drunk that evenin' and said he was going' home. He was kinda raisin' thunder around here—him and Sody Slavin and Dinah Blewette. Dinah and Short-Horn Adams had a fight, and Dinah got licked. Then Sody proceeds to lick Short-Horn—or to fix him so Dinah can lick him—which he does to the queen's taste. But that was long after Bud disappeared."

"And Bud needed the money, didn't he?" queried Hashknife.

"Yeah. He tried to borrow more from Lavelle that evenin', but didn't get it. I don't blame Lavelle. Bud wanted me to try and find his cows; but I was convinced that he'd sold the —— things; so I got mad at him for askin' me to hunt for 'em. If Bud shot Charley Morse——"

"He didn't," declared Hashknife. "He couldn't. You fellers shot Bud through the leg and he can't walk."

"Thasso?" Breed rubbed his chin and grinned at Hashknife.

"Yeah, that's so, Breed. That's an alibi for Bud. I know where Bud is right now, but I'm not goin' to tell you."

"I could arrest you for harborin' a criminal, Hartley."

"Hop to it," laughed Hashknife.

Breed frowned reflectively. He knew that Hashknife would not tell, and somehow he did not blame him. There was something about the tall, sad-faced cowpuncher that made Breed feel willing to tell him everything he knew.

"Hartley," he asked, "are you a detective?"

"No. I've done things that a detective might 'a' done; but never wore a badge. Didja yu ever notice that my nose is kinder long and sharp on the end? Breed, I was born to stick my nose into other people's business. I can't help it.

"Sleepy Stevens is my pet pessimist. Any old time I gets to feelin' real smart, he's there to hang crape on my soul. I need him. Cattle-ranges get sick, don'tcha know it? Yeah, they do. I reckon the cities get sick, too; but I don't *sabe* their disease. We're jist cowpunchers, Breed—me and Sleepy—but fate has made us a couple of medicine-men of the cow-country."

"Medicine-men?" quered Breed.

"Yeah—medicine-men, thasall."

Breed smiled and got to his feet as he said:

"All right, Hartley; Modoc needs somethin' in that line. I'm jist a sheriff. Nobody ever gave me credit for havin' brains. They're sayin' that I ought to find the men who robbed that train; find the man who killed Findlay and find Bud Daley. Now I've lost my deputy and got shot in the face with a scatter-gun. I reckon I've got a job on my hands."

"Like the Irishman said—single misfortunes seldom come alone," laughed Hashknife. "You forgot to mention Red Blair."

Breed looked quickly, suspiciously at Hashknife; but the tall cowpuncher was looking at Brent Allard, who was just riding past them, leading toward the hitch-rack beside the post office. Allard waved at them, and Hashknife nodded.

"We'll add Red Blair to the total," said Breed.

Hashknife looked up quickly and nodded.

"One more won't hurt."

Breed crossed toward the Rest Ye All, and Hashknife turned and sauntered down toward the post office, where Brent Allard was trying to tie a half-broken broncho to the rack. It was a mean-looking, glass-eyed gray with a snaky head and ears that seemed to be pinned down.

ALLARD had passed inside the post-office. Hashknife leaned against the corner and studied the animal. In a few minutes Allard came out, with a bundle of mail under his arm. He grinned at Hashknife, as he stuffed the mail into his coat-pockets.

"I seen yuh talkin' with the sheriff," he grinned. "By grab, I didn't think he'd ever speak to yuh, after the way yuh fooled him in the blind cañon."

"Aw, we're good friends," laughed Hashknife.

"Uh-huh," Allard glanced toward the saloon and back at Hashknife. "Well, he's got a little sense, anyway."

"That's a plumb forked-lookin' bronc yo're ridin'," observed Hashknife.

"That thing?" Allard's voice was filled with contempt. "Forked? Say," Allard laughed, "that —— bunch of coiled springs never knows when to quit bouncin'. It's about seven miles from here to the ranch, I reckon. Well, that bronc jist went seven miles high. Mebbe it went a little higher than it did long, 'cause there was times that we stuck to the same landin' spot for quite a spell."

"That's a —— of a thing to ride in after mail," laughed Hashknife.

Allard laughed and shoved the animal away from the rack, so he could untie the rope.

"That's what Monte said. But I told him there was so —— much bushwhackin' goin' on these days that I wanted to ride somethin' that would be awful hard to hit—even with a shotgun."

"Is Lavelle out at the ranch, Allard?"

"Naw. He don't come out much. Well, I've got to git ready to hammer this jughead out of town."

The gray whirled wickedly, but Allard

cramped its head back against its shoulder and snapped into the saddle. For a moment there was a blur of whirling horse and man; then the horse went high in a lunging pitch that almost unseated Allard, and sent a shower of mail from both his coat pockets.

Swiftly the gray changed ends, its head seemingly locked between its front feet, but Allard stuck like a burr. Into the street they went and the gray broke into a run, which took them out of town, like the fading of a motion picture on the screen.

Hashknife gathered up the mail from the dust and started into the post office, but a glance at one of the dusty envelopes caused him to flash a quick glance around as he swiftly slid it inside his shirt.

He walked into the post office and told the postmaster what had happened.

"I'll put it back," grinned the old man, "I don't reckon it's perishable. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Hashknife laughed with the old man and went outside. Sleepy and Sody had seen the bucking horse, and now they came across the street. They had imbibed several drinks and insisted on Hashknife joining them, but Hashknife was not in the mood.

Uncle Jimmy and Ma Miller came out of a store, and Hashknife got rid of Sleepy and Sody by hailing them.

"C'mon, Sleepy," urged Sody. "If Ma smells liquor on me, she'll gimme —— She always tells me a story about a feller who got all stunted to —— from whisky. Pers'nally I ain't scared of not growin' any more. C'mon."

Hashknife joined the old folks and asked where Mrs. Daley was.

"Oh, May stayed home," explained Ma. "She didn't have nothin' to buy, and she naturally don't like to talk to folks. She kinda feels that they're sayin' things about her. You know how it'd be."

"That—and other reasons," grinned Uncle Jimmy.

Hashknife nodded.

"You try and don't talk too much," warned Ma.

"I ain't said nothin', have I?" demanded Uncle Jimmy.

"Then don't repeat it," said Ma, and then to Hashknife:

"Are yuh comin' out soon? Come out and eat, can'tcha. My gosh, you'll ruin yore stummicks eatin' city food down here."

"We'll be out real soon," declared Hashknife. "Mebbe we'll be out tonight."

"You just do that," urged Ma. "I'll set two extra places."

Hashknife laughed and went over to the hitch-rack. Sody and Sleepy had disappeared. Hashknife hesitated for several minutes, but decided to let Sleepy go ahead and have a good time. He mounted his horse and rode out of town toward the ranch.

LAVELLE also knew that Mrs. Daley had been left at the JM ranch. It was the first time since Bud's arrest that Lavelle had had a chance to see her alone, and he lost no time in taking advantage of it.

He was careful to study the ranch-house at a distance before riding in, as he wanted to be sure that no one else was there. He dismounted at the front porch and knocked loudly on the door, but there was no response. He tried the door and found it unlocked.

Cautiously he opened it. The living-room was empty. Some one was moving about behind the half-open door of an adjoining room. He listened closely, thinking that perhaps his knock had not been heard.

"Hello," he said softly. "Anybody home?"

There was no reply, but the person in the next room continued to move about. Suddenly the door opened. Lavelle took a step backward, an unspoken exclamation on his lips.

Bud Daley was standing in the doorway, a half-dressed Bud Daley, whose face was flushed with fever, his eyes bloodshot. He blinked at Lavelle, but without a sign of recognition, muttering something unintelligible.

Some one was coming to the front of the house. Lavelle wanted to turn his head, but there was something that caused him to keep his eyes on Bud. Then Hashknife Hartley's voice drawled—

"Mister Lavelle, meet Mister Daley."

Lavelle turned his head and looked at Hashknife, who was leaning against the side of the doorway. Bud was paying no attention to either of them; he was too sick for that.

"I—I just came," said Lavelle lamely.

"I know yuh did," said Hashknife indifferently, and started to cross the room, when Mrs. Daley came in from the dining-room.

She was dressed for riding. At sight of them she stopped, with a quick intake of breath.

"It's all right," assured Hashknife softly. "There's nothin' to get scared about, May."

"I—I was just going to town after the doctor," she said wearily. "Bud's fever got worse, and there wasn't anybody here to help me."

Hashknife crossed to Bud and took him by the arm. Bud half-smiled, as if he recognized Hashknife, but did not speak.

"You get back into bed, old-timer," ordered Hashknife. "You've got to take it easy, don'tcha know it?"

Hashknife assisted him back to the bed, where Bud dropped wearily. Lavelle and May were left alone in the living-room, but neither of them spoke. Hashknife was back in a minute and went straight to Lavelle.

"You tryin' to collect that three thousand reward, Lavelle?" he asked.

Lavelle flushed hotly and wished that this long-faced, keen-eyed cowpuncher was miles away. Lavelle had the feeling that Hashknife wanted to make him angry; and Lavelle was too clever a gambler to show his anger.

"The reward does not interest me," he replied. "I just dropped in. But I had no idea that Bud was here."

"You waited until yuh knew that nobody but Mrs. Daley was here, yuh know," reminded Hashknife.

"All right," laughed Lavelle easily. "You did, too."

Hashknife's face grew serious as he nodded slowly.

"Yeah, that's true," he said softly. "I knowed that she was alone—with Bud. Yuh see, I think a lot of these folks, Lavelle. Now, there ain't nothin' for you to do, except to tell the sheriff where Bud is—and collect the reward."

"—— the reward!" snapped Lavelle. "I'm not looking for any reward."

"No? Well, that's funny," Hashknife laughed shortly. "You let Breed use yore cowpunchers to try and catch Bud."

"He swore them in, Hartley. I couldn't stop him, could I?"

"We've got to get a doctor for Bud," interrupted Mrs. Daley. "All this talk is a waste of time. You stay here and I'll go."

"And the sheriff will find it out," declared Lavelle.

"Will he?" queried Hashknife. "Listen to me, Lavelle. You've got enough power to keep Breed from doin' anythin'. Suppose you go after the doctor? He won't tell. And if Breed finds it out, a word from you will stop him from makin' any arrest."

Lavelle nodded quickly and turned to the door. He was willing to get away. Hashknife followed him out on to the porch and watched him mount.

"Just to save arguments, you might not tell the doctor who the sick person is, Lavelle," he said. "Tell him it's mostly a fever."

"All right," grunted Lavelle.

"And the sheriff won't come out here?"

"I'll do my best," said Lavelle.

"That won't be quite enough," said Hashknife meaningly.

Lavelle turned and rode swiftly away, while Hashknife went back into the house. Mrs. Daley was standing beside Bud's bed, looking down at him, when Hashknife came back in. Bud was mumbling in his delirium a meaningless jumble of broken sentences.

"—price of two dresses," he muttered. "—prettiest woman in this country."

Hashknife glanced keenly at Mrs. Daley. Her lips were shut tightly, and her hands clenched.

"What's he talkin' about?" queried Hashknife.

"—throw away your youth?" queried Bud, "—retain your beauty? Two can't live on cowpuncher's—failure—throw away your life."

Bud laughed bitterly in his delirium. "—silks and furs. Bud is man enough—loyalty and all that."

MRS. DALEY turned away, with tears running down her cheeks. Now she knew that Bud had come home and overheard Lavelle and her talking that night. That was why he did not come home; why he did not care what they did to him at that trial. He was willing to go to prison. And this was why Bud would not speak to her.

She walked out into the living-room and sat down in a chair, while Hashknife followed her to the doorway. Bud had quit talking now. Mrs. Daley looked up at Hashknife and found him staring intently at her.

"Oh, he's so sick." Her voice sounded strained, unreal, and she knew that Hashknife did not believe that she was overcome on account of Bud's condition.

"What did he mean?" asked Hashknife.

Mrs. Daley turned away, trying to ignore the question; but Hashknife was not to be denied. He came over and put his hand on her shoulder, shaking her a little.

"What did he mean?" he repeated. "Tell me, May."

She looked up at him and tried to get to her feet, but he held her firmly.

"Why, he's—he's just delirious," she faltered. "He doesn't know what——"

"It's back in his mind," said Hashknife firmly. "He don't realize what he's sayin', thasall."

"Will Lavelle send the doctor out?" asked Mrs. Daley.

"That's up to Lavelle, May. Now will yuh tell me what Bud means?"

"I—I don't know, Hashknife."

"You don't need to lie to me, May."

She looked up at him, her lips shut tightly; and she turned away from the determined expression in his eyes.

"And you know yuh lie, when yuh say yuh don't know, May," he said softly. "I'm yore friend—and I'm listenin' real close."

"You—you call me a liar?" she faltered. "And you say you are my friend?"

"I've had a lot of friends that lied, May. That's one of the failin's of the human race. There'll always be liars. Now come clean with me. I want to help yuh, but I've got to have the truth."

She got up from her chair and walked to the front doorway. He followed her and she went out on the porch, where she leaned against one of the porch-posts, staring off across the hills. Hashknife leaned easily against the side of the doorway and rolled a smoke. Back in the bedroom Bud muttered some broken sentences.

"Oh, I wish that doctor would hurry," said May nervously.

"It's quite a ways to town," said Hashknife. "But that's all right; Bud ain't in dangerous shape. Are yuh ready to talk?"

"Talk?" She turned on him wearily. "Oh, why don't you go away and let me alone? I have nothing to talk about."

He stepped out and put a hand on each of her shoulders, forcing her to look into his face.

"May," he asked softly, "are you in love with Lavelle?"

She shut her eyes quickly and shook her head violently.

"Is he in love with you?"

Quickly she turned away from him, but did not answer.

"All right, I reckon that's it," said Hashknife sadly. "I don't blame him. Yo're a lovable sort of a girl, May. I used to wonder how Bud Daley got yuh." He laughed softly and rubbed his chin.

"Yo're too good for Bud Daley."

She turned quickly, angrily.

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"He's just a cowpuncher, May. You ought to have silks and furs and all that, don'tcha know it?"

Her tightly shut lips trembled and tears came to her eyes. He was goading her with Bud's own words.

"Lavelle could give yuh all them things, May. He told yuh he could, didn't he?"

"Oh, why do you ask me these things?" she cried. "What good can it do you?"

"And Bud heard yuh talkin' with Lavelle, didn't he? He heard Lavelle offer yuh all these things, May? When did he hear this?"

"What good—?" she began.

"Was it the night that the bank was robbed?"

She tried to turn away, but he caught her by the arm and their eyes met. She nodded quickly and looked away.

"Thank yuh, May," he said softly. "Now, let's talk about it."

"Oh, I don't want to talk about anything, Hashknife. Please don't ask me to talk about it. I've had so much trouble——"

"Yo're goin' to talk to me," laughed Hashknife, "or I'm goin' to take you across my lap and spank yuh good; *sabe?*"

She turned angrily on him, but her sense of humor saved Hashknife. In spite of herself she was forced to laugh at his threat.

"Right down here on the steps," grinned Hashknife. "We'll set down and have a real good talk. I'm a danged good spanker, too."

They sat down together. It seemed easier to talk now.

"Now," said Hashknife, "I understand that Lavelle loves you, but you don't love him. Makes it tough on Lavelle, but lucky for you. And the night of the bank robbery, Bud heard Lavelle makin' love to you, eh?"

"I didn't know it," she confessed. "But those were some of the things that Lavelle said to me; so Bud must have overheard."

"Prob'ly broke Bud all up. He had tried to borrow more money from Lavelle that day. Makes it look bad for Bud. He needed money to buy yuh the things that Lavelle promised yuh. It's a good thing yuh didn't have to testify at the trial, or they'd 'a' hung him on that kind of testimony.

"Would you—say, May, this is gettin' danged personal, and mebbe yuh won't answer it, but I'm asking it just the same: If Bud had gone to the penitentiary, would you have married Lavelle?"

"I don't love Lavelle," she replied softly.

"He wanted to marry yuh, didn't he?"

"Yes—for a long time."

"Uh-huh. And if Bud was sent to the penitentiary, you could marry him, if yuh wanted to, May. There wasn't nothin' to stop yuh."

"I realize that," she said slowly. "Lavelle offered to take me away from here—away from Modoc. He said he would sell out and we could see the world. He came to me again, after Bud was convicted. But I told him that it was impossible. I was so sick over it all. He begged me to go away with him, but I refused. I told him that I was Bud's wife as long as he lived—no matter what he had done."

"That was square of yuh, May," said Hashknife softly. "I'm kinda proud of yuh, don'tcha know it?"

"And you don't blame me, Hashknife?" she asked eagerly.

"Not that I know of," he smiled. "It wasn't no fault of yours, if Lavelle loved yuh. You wouldn't be hard to love. If I was ten years younger, I'd love yuh myself."

She laughed softly and the color came back to her face.

"I didn't know that age was a barrier to love," she said.

"There's different kinds of love, May. The kind you know is yore love for Bud. That's the love of youth. If I was ten years younger—" Hashknife laughed and got to his feet. "Gettin' kinda stiff in the knees."

"You are not over forty, Hashknife."

"Well?"

"Lavelle is almost forty."

"And yo're about twenty-two. Say, you ain't tryin' to make love to me, are yuh, May?"

"Certainly not!"

"Squirshed agin'," said Hashknife dejectedly. "I never did have no luck. I got stuck on a waitress in Cheyenne once. She had the prettiest hair I ever seen. I reckon I got stuck on her hair. Well, one day she was waitin' on my table and I asked her to go to a dance with me that night. I was sure goin' to ask her to marry me that night." Hashknife laughed softly and rubbed his chin.

"Well, she said she'd go with me. She was standin' agin' the wall, where the hooks are that yuh hang yore hats on, and when she turned to go back to the kitchen, her hair got caught on a hook—and stayed there."

"Stayed there?" wondered May.

"Uh-uh." Hashknife laughed heartily. "It was a wig. She was as bald as an aig. She beat it for the kitchen; so I got the wig and gave it to the cashier. That was my only experience as a hair-restorer.

Mrs. Daley laughed heartily over Hashknife's sorrows, and to take her mind off the long wait for the doctor, he told her some of the experiences that he and Sleepy had encountered; telling them in a whimsical way, taking no credit for himself.

It was an hour or so later that the doctor arrived. He asked no questions, but proceeded to administer to Bud, who had recovered to a certain extent. Uncle Jimmy and Ma Miller came home, excited over the presence of the doctor, until Hashknife explained how it had all happened.

"And what was Lavelle doin' out here?" demanded Ma Miller.

"I reckon he just dropped in," said Hashknife.

"Dropped, eh?" Ma was suspicious and did not conceal it.

"Ma, it's none of yore business," said Uncle Jimmy, glad of a chance to chide her. "He didn't come out here to see you, 'cause he knowed you was in town."

"Yeah, and he knew that May was here alone. I don't like it."

Ma bustled away into the kitchen, and Hashknife went back to his horse. Uncle Jimmy begged him to stay for supper, but Hashknife declined.

"Mebbe t'morrow night. I've got some folks that I want to see pretty soon."

"Well, make it tomorrow night then," said Uncle Jimmy regretfully. "Ma'll probably raise —— when she finds out that yo're gone, but yo're single and can do as yuh —— please. Might do her good to find out that she can't boss everybody."

V

HASHKNIFE rode back toward town, deep in thought. He drew out the letter he had purloined from the 76 A mail and looked it over again. It was directed to Cleve Lavelle and postmarked Black Wells. Inside was a single sheet of paper, on which was written in lead-pencil:

$75 dols. Plese remit.

It was unsigned. Hashknife grinned as he touched a lighted match to a corner of it and watched it burn to ashes. Then he rode on into Modoc and tied his horse to the Rest Ye All rack.

There were three horses at the rack, which looked as if they might have traveled a long ways. Hashknife noticed that two of them bore a Cross-Arrow, while the third was branded with three parallel bars on the left hip. He had seen these brands at Black Wells. It was evident that some of Black Wells had come to Modoc, and he wondered if it was any of the gang that were in the Welcome saloon when Sleepy had bombarded the place.

Modoc was a well-patronized town on Saturday. There were many men in the Rest Ye All, but Hashknife decided not to go in. There was no use of running into trouble; which would probably result if he ran into some folks he knew in Black Wells.

He crossed the street and ran into Breed, who seemed visibly worried. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the hitch-rack at the Rest Ye All.

"Jud Mahley and a couple of other hard roosters came over from Black Wells t'day, Hartley. They're in the saloon, drinkin' hard liquor and keepin' an eye on the door. Sleepy and Sody are down at the Elite saloon, singin' songs to a bartender, who don't care for music."

"Well, he ain't hearin' any," laughed Hashknife.

Breed grinned shortly and squinted the length of the street.

"I know. But there'll be —— to pay, if them two meet Mahley and his two friends. I figure that they came here to get even for what happened to Mahley. He's a dirty coyote, Hartley; and the two men with him ain't no better. What had we better do?"

"Well," said Hashknife slowly, "I reckon we better find a preacher and have him pray a few times for Mahley and his two gun-men. I dunno much about Sody Slavin, but I know that Sleepy is able to protect his own hide."

"I wasn't worryin' about Sody," grinned Breed. "He's a big, fat son of a biscuit-shooter, but he's a humdinger in a fight. You kinda figure in this, too, don'tcha?"

"Oh, that don't matter. I'll kinda keep out of sight, I s'pose."

Breed laughed and hitched up his belt. He felt better about it now.

"You ain't worryin', are yuh?" asked Hashknife.

"No-o-o, I reckon it'll be all right. Had supper yet?"

"Nor dinner," grinned Hashknife. "Plumb forgot it. Let's get Sody and Sleepy and all go to eat together. It'll give us a good chance to keep 'em away from Juddie and his gang."

"That's the ticket." Breed was enthusiastic, but became dubious.

"I seen 'em a while ago, and they wasn't open to suggestions. Mebbe you can convince 'em, I dunno."

They found the two cowpunchers in the Elite, leaning against the bar, while Sody was trying to tell Sleepy a story about Christopher Columbus. It dealt with Columbus' feat of standing an egg on end. Sody had the egg. The bartender, a sleek, fat individual, with a scant growth of hair, well plastered down, was interested in the narrative, and none of them paid any attention to the coming of Hashknife and Breed.

"Well, how'd he do it?" asked Sleepy, owl-eyed. "Yuh can't stand no aig on end, Sody. It ain't built thataway, I tell yuh. Old Chris must 'a' had a hen that laid a flat-ended aig."

"Noshir," Sody wagged his head wisely. "Here's how he done it."

Sody grasped the egg firmly in his ham-like hand, held it aloft in triumph.

"Wa'sh me closely," he chuckled, "There's no mushtash to desheeve the eye. Ol' Chris jus' took the aig—thusly, and——"

Thump! Sody brought his hand down

hard enough to have broken a much tougher article than an egg, and the contents of the fruit of the hen-house squirted all over the interested bartender.

He backed against the back-bar, clawing the yolk out of his eyes, while Sody looked goggle-eyed at the crushed mass in his palm. Sleepy moved back, his nose twitching.

"Didja see her stand on end?" asked Sody foolishly.

"I didn't see it," said Sleepy. "But I betcha it could. My ——, that aig was old enough to whip the hen that laid it."

"You've gotta lot of nerve," wailed the bartender, brushing furiously at the bobby-goo on his white vest. "Next time yuh want to tell stories, keep away from here. My ——, that's a strong egg!"

Sody reached across the bar and dragged the palm of his hand across the edge to dislodge the remnants of the egg, while with the other hand he held his nose.

"Well, 'f here ain't m' fambly!" exclaimed Sleepy, catching sight of Hashknife. "Yo're late, cowboy. Sody jist showed us how to stand an aig on end. C'mon and have a drink."

"You've had a plenty," grinned Hashknife. "You and Sody are invited to eat supper with me and the sheriff."

"We ain't under arrest, are we?"queried Sody quickly.

"Not yet—but the evenin' is still young. C'mon."

"There's somethin' wrong," declared Sleepy wisely. "They want to keep an eye on us, Sody. Whatcha s'pose it is?"

"I dunno, and I don't care," declared Sody. "I'm hongry—but not for aigs. Waugh! A voice from the tomb. C'mon, let's go."

They went up the street to a restaurant and ordered their meals. Sleepy was suspicious. He knew that there was a reason for bringing them up there, and in a few minutes Hashknife told them.

"Great lovely dove!" exploded Sody. "That lop-eared whangdoodle came back here? Mamma mine, what we'll do to him will be a joy for the Cannibal Islands. Where are they, Hashknife?"

"Set still," ordered Hashknife. "You two jiggers are goin' to promise me that yuh won't start no trouble. Until the proper time, Mahley and his gang are as safe as a church; *sabe?*"

"Oh, yeah!" snorted Sleepy indignantly. "They came back here to get even with us—and we've got to take it, eh?"

"No, I don't mean that, Sleepy; and you know I don't. Keep away from Mahley and his men. You don't need to butt into 'em, do yuh?"

"It would be a lot of fun," muttered Sleepy. "I want to take a shot at that bat-eared pelican. He ain't no good, dang his hide."

"But yuh won't take no shot at him, Sleepy," said Hashknife. "I told yuh not to, and you mind me real fine."

"All right," Sleepy nodded violently and upset a glass of water with his elbow. "I'll keep my paws off him for yore sake, but if you kill him without givin' me and Sody a chance at him we'll see that Sandy Claws don't come to yore house next Christmas."

They ate their supper and went back to the street. Hashknife noticed that the three Black Wells horses were missing from the hitch-rack, and sighed with relief. He felt sure that Sleepy and Sody would proceed to forget what they had promised—and prove a good alibi later on.

Sody seemed to have an idea that the Elite bartender might be getting lonesome; so he and Sleepy headed down there, while Breed and Hashknife sauntered down to Breed's office and went inside.

IT WAS growing dark and Breed lighted a lamp. They sat down and smoked for a while, discussing things in general. The talk drifted around to Bud Daley and his troubles.

"They convicted Bud on a silver rosette, didn't they?" asked Hashknife.

"Yeah," nodded Breed. "Didn't yuh ever see it?"

He flung open a drawer of his desk beside Hashknife and took out the rosette, which had been thrown in on top of some papers. Hashknife examined it closely. It was a hand-made thing and very distinctively hammered and engraved.

"There was no argument about the ownership," said Breed as Hashknife examined it under the light of the lamp.

He had one hand in his pocket, but now he withdrew the hand.

"Funny how a thing like that will convict a man," he mused. "Bud made it with his own hands; hammered it out to suit himself, and the danged thing made an outlaw out of him. Well—" he turned and dropped the shining ornament back into the drawer and shoved it shut—"it's the little things in life that do the damage."

"It sure looks thataway," nodded Breed. "But for some reason I ain't worryin' about catchin' Bud. He's worth three thousand to the man that finds him, and I kinda hope he won't be found. Funny thing for a sheriff to say, ain't it?"

Hashknife laughed softly.

"I'm glad yuh feel thataway, Breed. Mebbe you'll be disappointed, but I don't think so."

"Anyway, I'm not huntin' for him, Hartley. I probably won't be the next sheriff of Modoc."

"Keep yore shirt on," grinned Hashknife. "Everybody in the county ain't agin' Bud Daley; and yuh might still get a vote or two."

"All right, Medicine-Man," laughed Breed. "We'll wait and see what happens."

They went over to the Rest Ye All and moved about the gambling-room. It was a big night and the games were well patronized. Lavelle was there watching the play. He glanced nervously at Hashknife and Breed, and Hashknife noticed a slight pallor about his face.

Lavelle was not a quiet dresser at any time, but tonight he sparkled with sartorial splendor. He nodded shortly, as Hashknife and Breed passed him, but Hashknife did not speak. Lavelle looked after the tall cowpuncher, a half-sneer on his lips. He noted the big, holstered six-shooter which seemed to cling tightly to Hashknife's thigh, hanging at just the right angle for a quick draw.

He wondered where Sleepy and Sody were. They had been around earlier in the day. Not that he wanted to see them come in. They were too rough, too boisterous to suit Lavelle; but he rather wanted to know where they were and what they were doing.

Hashknife placed a few bets on the roulette and won the majority of them. But he did not care for roulette. It was all luck, when the wheel was honest. Hashknife preferred to match his brains with others at draw or stud poker. But both big games were filled.

He stood around for a while, watching the games and talking with the players. Breed suddenly disappeared. Hashknife looked for him, but he was not in the house; so Hashknife took a seat near the wall and proceeded to smoke a cigaret.

It was about fifteen minutes later that Sleepy and Sody came in. They seemed in a hurry and there was little evidence in their actions that they had ever taken a drink. They saw Hashknife and came straight to him, drawing him away from the crowd.

"It's all off with Bud, unless we act quick," whispered Sleepy. "That —— Mahley found out where Bud is and has told the sheriff."

"How did Mahley find out?" queried Hashknife.

"He told Breed that the doctor told him. Breed just left with a livery-rig, but he told me to tell you. Now, we've got to do somethin' real fast, Hashknife."

"What can we do?" queried Hashknife. "The sheriff knows where Bud is, and Bud's too sick to move. We can't fight the sheriff.".

"We can go down and kill that —— doctor," said Sody seriously. "Me and Sleepy are gunnin' for Mahley and his two pet skunks, as soon as they show up back here."

"Breed took a livery-rig, eh?" mused Hashknife. "He must figure on bringin' Bud back with him. How long has he been gone?"

"About ten minutes," said Sleepy anxiously. "We can still beat him to the JM, if we cut the hills."

Hashknife shook his head slowly and squinted back at the windows of the Rest Ye All.

"No, it wouldn't do us any good, boys. Killin' Mahley won't stop Bud's capture. We've just got to let 'em go ahead; and in the meantime, let's go back and see if Lavelle's luck is still good."

Both Sody and Sleepy grumbled over what they were going to do to Jud Mahley and his two companions, but they followed Hashknife into the gambling-house.

Lavelle was watching the stud-game, and Hashknife stopped near him. Lavelle glanced quickly at Hashknife, but turned back to the game.

"You ain't playin' much these days, are yuh, Lavelle?" asked Hashknife.

His voice was loud enough for those at the game to hear, and the dealer looked up at Lavelle, who turned quickly to Hashknife.

"Well, what about it?" Lavelle's voice held a trace of annoyance.

"Ain't takin' chances on bad luck," grinned Hashknife.

Lavelle stared intently at the table for several moments, as if trying to make up his mind what to say. One of the players shoved his chips over to the dealer, who stacked them quickly and shoved the correct amount in coin across to the player.

"Looks like easy money," grinned Hashknife.

"Try it!" snapped Lavelle, indicating the vacant chair.

Hashknife laughed softly, but did not accept.

"I was just wonderin' whether it was yore personal hoodoo, or whether the house was just havin' a run of bad luck."

Lavelle shifted uneasily. Some of the players laughed, and it angered Lavelle. He disliked being laughed at. Suddenly he looked at Hashknife, a sneer on his lips.

"What's all this talk about hoodoos, Hartley? If you've got money enough to make it worth while, I'll gamble with you."

"From what I've seen around here, it don't take much," laughed Hashknife. "A dollar runs into hundreds pretty quick."

"I don't gamble with pikers," said Lavelle coldy and turned away.

"Same here," laughed Hashknife. "So there ain't no chance for us to clash."

LAVELLE turned and came back to the table. He was mad. At a signal from him, the dealer got up and let Lavelle sit down in his place. Swiftly Lavelle arranged the chips to suit himself, broke open a new deck of cards and looked up at Hashknife.

"I thought I'd bluff yuh into dealin'," grinned Hashknife, sliding into the vacant chair. "You ought to be easy to beat."

The muscles around Lavelle's thin mouth twitched slightly, but he did not reply. His hands trembled visibly as he shuffled the cards. The other three players seemed amused, and grinned at the circle of spectators. Sody and Sleepy were in that circle; Sody stolid in his interest, Sleepy alert, because he knew that this gambling challenge was not at all like Hashknife.

Hashknife drew out a roll of bills and tossed five of them across to Lavelle.

"Give me twenty blues," he said.

Lavelle accepted the hundred dollars and shoved the small stack of blue chips across the table, each chip worth five dollars.

"Cash mine in, Lavelle," said one of the players. "I can't see clear enough to bet only five-dollar chips."

Lavelle smiled coldly and counted the man's chips. One of the other players shuffled uneasily, but decided to stay. The other grinned and separated his chips into two piles.

"One's velvet," he said. "I'll play close to m' stummick."

Four blue chips decorated the center of the green-covered table, and Lavelle began the deal. Hashknife did not look at his hole-card. Monte Sells and Brent Allard came in from the bar and stopped to look at the game.

On the second round, both Hashknife and Lavelle received aces, hearts and diamonds. Hashknife flipped three blue chips to the center. Lavelle stayed, but the other two dropped out.

"I'll high-spade yuh for ten dollars, Lavelle," challenged Hashknife, but Lavelle ignored him.

The ace of clubs fell to Hashknife, while Lavelle drew a small card. Hashknife bet five blues, but Lavelle dropped.

"Looks easy," grinned Hashknife, raking in the pot. "I'm better off than the boys were who had inside information that the big payroll was goin' to Dixon that night."

Lavelle's eyes flashed questioningly at Hashknife, but he was stacking his chips carefully and did not look up. Brent Allard shot a swift glance at Monte Sells, and their eyes met.

On the next deal Hashknife passed without looking at his hole-card. Lavelle gave him a curious look, but Hashknife only grinned and said:

"Luck's a funny thing. Now, take Bud Daley, as an example; he's unlucky. Somebody stole all his cows, and there's a lot of folks who don't know yet who stole 'em."

Lavelle scowled heavily as the player at Hashknife's right won the pot and raked it in with a laugh.

"Is this a poker game or a lecture?" growled Lavelle angrily.

Hashknife grinned widely and rested his elbows on the table.

"I like to entertain folks, Lavelle," he said. "Don't mind me; go ahead with the deal."

The onlookers were beginning to enjoy it. Lavelle was noted for his cold, hard nerve, and it amused them to see him so angry that his dealing was jerky. Hashknife peeked at his hole-card and laughed loudly.

"I've got a card in the hole that looks like Jud Mahley," he announced. "Jud Mahley in the hole, Lavelle. Deal ag'in; this is sure gettin' good."

Hashknife seemed to pay no more attention to his hand, but called the bets as the cards dropped. He had two jacks in sight, while Lavelle's hand showed a pair of eights. The other two players quit. Hashknife bet twenty dollars, and, after due deliberation, Lavelle conceded the pot to Hashknife, who uncovered his hole-card—a deuce of spades.

"Thought I had a knave, didn't yuh, Lavelle? You knowed that Mahley was a knave. Ha-ha-ha-ha! He's a dirty deuce, too."

Lavelle shut his jaw tightly and shuffled the cards in a savage way.

"Leave some of the spots on 'em," cautioned Hashknife. "Jist 'cause yo're mad—don't ruin the pretty cards."

After the next hand, the other two players decided that the pace was too hot for them, and dropped out. Lavelle cashed in their chips, leaving himself and Hashknife to a single-handed battle.

"Speakin' of Jud Mahley," said Hashknife seriously. "There's a lot of pickpockets in Black Wells."

He looked around as if challenging somebody to dispute his statement. Sleepy was grinning widely.

"We know it, don't we, Hashknife?" he laughed.

"Danged right. Whisky dopers, too. I understand that somebody in Modoc has got to pay seventy dollars damage to the Welcome saloon. That'll take off some of the profit from Bud's cows."

Lavelle had dealt two cards and was waiting for Hashknife to make his bet. Lavelle's eyes looked strained and there were tiny beads of perspiration about his temples. The crowd around the table, with the exception of Sleepy, did not know what it was all about, but they were more interested in Hashknife than they were in the two-handed stud-game.

"That's what happens when yuh lose yore luck," continued Hashknife, tossing some chips to the center. "Feller gets to worryin' about it and snags himself in his own loop. Bud didn't have bad luck—he had some bad friends. Now the sheriff has gone after him. He's sick in bed, with a bullet-hole in his leg. They'll bring him back pretty soon. You callin' my last bet, Lavelle?"

Lavelle was staring at the pot, holding the cards tightly in his hand. He had called Hashknife's last bet; but now he called it again. Which showed that Lavelle's mind was not on the game.

"Yo're of this game, but not in it," laughed Hashknife. "But yuh might as well leave that fifteen dollars in the pot, 'cause I'll get it anyway. You ain't even got poker sense, Lavelle."

Lavelle flushed hotly and looked around. The former dealer was at his elbow, and Lavelle started to get out of his chair.

"Goin' to change dealers, eh?" sneered Hashknife. "Afraid to trust yore luck any further, are yuh, Lavelle? Yo're a —— of a gambler, you are. Why don't yuh git some buildin' blocks and play behind the bar, where nobody can see yuh?"

Lavelle snapped back into his chair, his face white from the sting of Hashknife's insults.

"You want to play poker?" he snarled angrily, "You game to play a man-sized game of cards? By ——, I'll show you some action. Buy enough chips to make it worth while, you mouthy fool!"

Hashknife leaned across the table and laughed into Lavelle's face.

"You can be bluffed, Lavelle. Right now yore heart is yaller from the gall yo're usin' to brace it up."

Hashknife drew out a bill-fold and took out three one-thousand-dollar bills, which he tossed carelessly across to Lavelle. The ring of onlookers crowded in close to look at the money.

"My ——!" exploded a cowpuncher. "Thousand-dollar bills! I didn't know they was that much money in the world."

"They're a safe size," laughed Hashknife, "If yuh stole one, you'd have a —— of a time disposin' of it in this country."

Lavelle squinted at the money closely.

"How big do you want to play this?" he asked.

"Man-size," laughed Hashknife. "You name the amount. I'm in favor of hundred-dollar chips and no limit."

Sleepy moved in a little closer and tossed a cheap bill-fold on to the table in front of Hashknife.

"Here's another the same size," said

Sleepy indifferently. "Give him plenty of action, cowboy."

Hashknife grinned up at Sleepy and nodded his thanks. Lavelle flashed a glance at Sleepy, but continued to count out chips. His fingers trembled slightly and a chip fell to the floor as he shoved thirty chips across to Hashknife.

It was the biggest price ever paid for poker chips in Modoc, and it did not take the whole room long to find out that something out of the ordinary was going on at the stud table.

It was out of the ordinary for cowpunchers to have as much money as Hashknife and Sleepy had shown, and many of the onlookers glanced significantly at each other. But the money had been honestly earned. It was their pay for cleaning up a crew of rustlers in the Ghost Hills, which had happened but a short time previous to their arrival in Modoc. Hashknife had insisted on taking the money in thousand-dollar bills, because it would be more difficult for them to get one cashed. Both he and Sleepy had visions of saving enough to buy them a little outfit and go into the cattle business.

THE crowd grew silent as the game began. Lavelle's face was a set mask under the yellow light of the big lamp. Hashknife's grin hid any emotion he might have felt, and he handled hundred-dollar chips as if they were pennies.

Hand after hand they played, one player or the other conceding the pot, after two or three cards had been dealt. Neither man was winner as yet; but every one knew that sooner or later they would get the cards they were looking for.

"Kinda funny about Charley Morse," observed Hashknife, as he peered at his hole-card. "The feller that killed him didn't have a shotgun until he came to Modoc. Yuh see, he didn't have nothin' agin' Charley Morse nor Breed. He wanted to kill me or my pardner. It was just another fool mistake. Killers all make mistakes."

The crowd was listening intently, wondering. Lavelle shifted in his chair, looking nervously at Hashknife as he said hoarsely—

"You calling my bet?"

Hashknife rolled two chips to the center, and they promptly circled and rolled back to his side of the table.

"They know where the luck is," laughed Hashknife. "They want to come back to me, Lavelle."

Lavelle muttered a curse and dealt the next card. The board showed that Hashknife had a jack and a six, while Lavelle had a pair of tens."

"Twenty miles of railroad," laughed Hashknife. "Yore bet."

After a moment of hesitation, Lavelle shoved five hundred dollars to the center. Hashknife laughed softly and fingered his chips.

"Mahley in the hole," he muttered. "A jack and six in sight. That beats a pair of tens, so I call."

He shoved in five chips and grinned widely. Lavelle studied Hashknife's hand, a half-smile on his lips, as he said—

"Are you playing table-stakes, Hartley?"

Hashknife laughed softly and leaned back in his chair.

"You make your bets, Lavelle. I've got over six thousand here."

Lavelle flipped off the next two cards, which showed another six for Hashknife and a trey for himself. Hashknife's hand showed a pair of sixes and a jack, while Lavelle's showed a pair of tens and a tray.

"Yore tens are still good," grinned Hashknife.

Lavelle shoved five chips to the center. Hashknife laughed as he shoved in five chips to cover the bet and then added ten more as a raise.

"My ——!" exploded a cowpuncher. "Raised him a thousand!"

Lavelle moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue and stared hard at Hashknife, who was rolling a cigaret with hands that did not tremble. Again Lavelle looked at the pip on his hole-card. It was a six spot. He realized that there were big odds against Hashknife having a six spot in the hole.

And he remembered that Hashknife had said that he had a "Mahley" in the hole. The last time it had been a deuce; this time it might be a jack. Lavelle's fingers trembled over his chips.

"That bank robbery was a funny deal," said Hashknife, and Lavelle looked up quickly.

"Funny thing that Bud would pick the vault to lose that silver rosette in," continued Hashknife thoughtfully. "It's too bad that the cashier didn't live long enough to tell who done it. He knew, too."

"Oh, for ——'s sake, shut up!" snarled Lavelle. "What's all the talk about, anyway?"

"I'm tryin' to take yore mind off yore bad luck," laughed Hashknife. "I want yuh to call that thousand; but yo're afraid to do it, when yuh stop to think. You know where yore luck went, but that don't help yuh any, Lavelle. Yuh get kinda sick in the stummick, when yuh think about it, don'tcha?"

Lavelle's eyes narrowed, as he shoved ten chips into the pot.

"Bluffed yuh into it, eh?" Hashknife laughed triumphantly. "Yuh didn't do that because yo're brave; yuh did it because yo're plumb scared to death."

"What in —— are you talking about?" said Lavelle hoarsely.

"Yore luck. Go ahead and deal."

Lavelle picked up the deck and dealt two more cards. A gasp went up from the crowd, when they saw that Hashknife had drawn another six, while Lavelle had another ten-spot.

Lavelle stared at the two hands and a smile of triumph flashed across his lips.

"What about luck now, Hartley?" he asked nervously.

Hashknife lifted his eyes from an inspection of the two hands and grinned widely.

"Yore three tens bets, Lavelle."

There was no nervousness in Hashknife's voice—only amusement. Lavelle hesitated. He had faced many a man across the green cloth, but this man was different from the rest. That third ten had brought the courage back into Lavelle's heart, but now he felt it oozing away again.

THE crowd moved slightly, and Hashknife looked up to see Jud Mahley and his two companions crowding in for a look at the table. Hashknife glanced at Sleepy and Sody. They had seen Jud. Sleepy flashed a glance at Hashknife, who turned back to his game. He was not worrying about Jud Mahley now.

"A lot of folks wondered why Bud Daley wouldn't tell where he was the night of the bank robbery," said Hashknife, as if talking to himself. "I can tell 'em. I know. I know where that rosette came from, and I know who planted it."

The crowd stirred nervously. They were hearing something. On the fringe of the crowd a man questioned another. He wanted to know if he had heard rightly. Still Lavelle did not bet.

"Take yore time," said Hashknife softly. "I'll entertain the crowd while yuh figure it out. Yuh know, it took me quite a while to figure out why Bud Daley was taken away from the sheriff."

Lavelle jerked up his head.

"What in —— do I care about Bud Daley?"

Lavelle's voice was almost a whine. Perspiration trickled into his eyes, but he did not try to wipe it away.

"Somebody wanted Bud killed," stated Hashknife. "And it wasn't because they wanted to avenge the death of the cashier either. Ain't yuh about ready to back up yore three tens, Lavelle?"

With a nervous jerk of his hand Lavelle tossed some chips into the pot.

"Gettin' jerky, eh?" Hashknife laughed. "Count 'em, Lavelle."

"Eight chips," whispered a bystander.

Hashknife slowly counted the pot and found that Lavelle had bet eight hundred dollars.

"You ain't got much faith, have yuh?"

Hashknife threw in eight chips and added a thousand dollar bill from Sleepy's bill fold.

"There's a thousand that says my sixes win, Lavelle."

Lavelle swallowed hard and stared at the pot. His nerves were rubbed raw and he wanted to get away. Hashknife was talking again.

"Those pickpockets at Black Wells were disappointed."

As he spoke he looked up at Jud Mahley. The Black Wells cowpuncher did not have a poker-face, and Hashknife's statement brought a startled expression to his countenance. He shot a quick glance sidewise toward the door and looked into the face of Sleepy Stevens. Then Mr. Mahley turned his head and studied the wall, but his hands dropped along his hips.

"Folks who don't know might think it was funny that they would dope and rob a stranger," continued Hashknife. "They didn't know us—except from description. I don't wonder that they want Lavelle to pay damages."

Lavelle stared at Hashknife, his mouth half-open, as if he were badly in need of oxygen. He seemed to have trouble in keeping his hands on the table. He tipped a stack of chips, and they rattled loudly.

"Sounds like a skeleton," laughed Hashknife. "Didja ever hear a skeleton rattle, Lavelle?"

"—— you!" breathed Lavelle. "What's all this talk about? What damages? I never——"

Breed shoved his way to the table, and behind him was Uncle Jimmy—a very angry Uncle Jimmy.

"They got Bud, Hashknife," he said. "The sheriff brought him in."

"Don't worry about it," soothed Hashknife.

"Don't you worry about anythin' either, Hashknife," laughed Sleepy. "Go ahead and play the game."

Lavelle shaded his eyes with his hand as he slowly counted out his chips. Then he shoved thirty chips to the center of the table; a thousand dollars to call Hashknife's raise, and a two thousand dollar tilt to the pot.

He did not say a word, but leaned back, dropping his hands to his lap. Hashknife grinned widely as he said:

"You bet that money just like it was the last bet you'd ever make, Lavelle. I wonder if you had a hunch. Gamblers do have hunches, don't they? I've got one, too. But my hunch is backed up by good-luck."

He leaned across the table, his face suddenly serious, his voice ominous.

"I'm goin' to call that bet, Lavelle. There's a black cat settin' on yore shoulder, look'n at yuh."

Lavelle twitched quickly, and his eyes flashed sidewise. Hashknife laughed, as he shoved in two thousand dollars. Then something flashed in the lamplight as he tossed an object to the center of the table, where it rattled among the chips.

"I'll raise yuh that much, Lavelle."

Lavelle jerked forward, staring at the object. It was the rosette that had been found on the vault floor. Breed gasped and shifted his feet. Lavelle licked his lips and stared at it.

"It'll take everythin' yuh own to cover that, Lavelle," Hashknife's voice was low, but every one heard him. "That represents a lot of misery, murder and money. You had it once, Lavelle. You got it the night you was out at Bud's ranch—that night, Lavelle."

Lavelle did not speak. It is doubtful whether he could have spoken. His eyes met Hashknife's, and Hashknife was not smiling. He reached slowly into his vest pocket, clenched his hand and extended it across the table and almost under Lavelle's nose.

"It'll take everythin' yuh own to call that last raise, Lavelle," he said. "But yuh can't win. The god of luck deserted yuh the night that the train was held up; the night you took Bud Daley away from Dug Breed; the night you had the boys from the 76A hold up the express car so that you could have a chance to take Bud away from the sheriff."

There was not a sound, except the heavy breathing of the crowd. Lavelle seemed to turn to stone under the accusation.

"You lost your luck that night, Lavelle. It's here in my hand. You had 'em dope and rob us at Black Wells, thinkin' I'd have it with me. You had Jud Mahley try to kill me, but he made a mistake and killed Charley Morse."

"All lies!" breathed Lavelle. His lips barely moved, but his eyes looked straight ahead. "You can't prove it—you can't."

"It proves itself," said Hashknife. "You stole Bud's cows to try and break him, Lavelle. Then you robbed the bank to send him to the penitentiary. You dirty coyote, you wanted Bud's wife. But she told you that she was Bud's wife as long as he lived; so you took him away from the law, hoping that he would be killed before being taken. Here's what broke yuh, Lavelle."

Hashknife opened his hand. It was a piece of silver, about the size of a half-dollar. As swift as the slash of a cat, Lavelle struck Hashknife's hand aside and flung himself backward drawing a gun from the side-pocket of his coat, while the crowd behind him scattered like a covey of frightened quail.

But if Lavelle acted quickly, Hashknife was prepared. His two hands flashed to the edge of the table, as he flung himself forward, throwing the weight of the overturning table into Lavelle, who promptly went over backward, crashing to the floor with his chair under him and the edge of the heavy table across his throat. Lavelle's gun exploded, sending a bullet screeching along the floor and into the boot-heel of a cowboy, who jumped high from the impact.

The crash of Lavelle's gun blended with the roar of Sleepy's six-shooter. Jud Mahley's right hand relaxed from around the butt of his cocked gun and his close-set eyes blinked foolishly as he tried to reason out why certain things were being done. For instance, why were several men struggling, cursing, fighting beside him; why were men shouting? Then the earth was jerked from under Jud Mahley.

Hashknife rolled the table-edge off Lavelle's throat and kicked the revolver out of his nerveless hand. Mahley's two companions were down on the floor, with Sody and Sleepy astride them, while Dug Breed jerked this way and that way, trying to figure out what to do first.

"Well, you danged jumpin'-jack, get us some ropes," yelled Sleepy. "Do yuh think we want to set on 'em until they petrify."

Breed turned to obey the order, but men were already producing ropes to tie up Lavelle and the two men from Black Wells. Jud Mahley needed no rope. Monte Sells and Brent Allard had disappeared in the confusion, picking up Frank Asher and Mesa Caldwell at the 76A and leaving only the tracks of four horses to show that they were all through with the Modoc country.

Hashknife gathered up his money from the floor and walked outside, while men tugged at his sleeve and demanded that he tell them the whole story. Uncle Jimmy shoved them aside and grabbed Hashknife with both hands.

"One of them punchers confessed to stealin' cows!" he blurted. "Lavelle hired 'em to do it. And Lavelle gave Mahley the shotgun to kill yuh with. You sure was right, Hashknife. I've got to tell Ma and May."

He ran across the street toward the sheriff's office, and Hashknife followed him. The crowd had already got there with Lavelle and the two punchers. Bud was lying on the sheriff's cot, exhausted from the rough ride, but conscious.

The crowd almost mobbed Bud, trying to exhibit their glee in his exoneration; but he did not know what it was all about. His wife, white of face, her eyes staring with fright, watched them and listened with ears that caught only a jumble of words.

Then Cleve Lavelle and the two cowboys were pushed roughly past her and into the cells at the rear, while Uncle Jimmy almost knocked her down in his joy and excitement.

"Bud is cleared!" he shouted in her face. "Don'tcha know what I'm sayin'? I tell yuh, he's cleared!"

She tried to smile. It was like a dream. He shook her violently, as if trying to force her to understand. Ma Miller caught him by the arm and yanked him away.

"Don't shake her, you ninny!" grunted Ma. "What happened, Jim? Tell me what happened?"

She shook him roughly with both hands.

"Don't shake me, woman!" he exploded. "I'm jist about to bust."

Hashknife came in and Uncle Jimmy pointed at him.

"He done it—the son of a gun—he done it! I tell yuh, he was the one what done it. I dunno how he done it, but he did."

Dinah Blewette shoved in and tried to shake hands with Mrs. Daley. For once in his life, Dinah did not try to talk.

"What is it all about?" queried Mrs. Daley. "I—I don't——"

"It means that Bud is cleared," explained Sody. "Lavelle was the guilty man. Hashknife Hartley put the deadwood on him."

Mrs. Daley lifted her head and looked at Hashknife, her eyes filling with tears of gratitude. Bud had lifted on one elbow and the men stepped aside to let him see what was going on. They had told him enough to let him know that he was cleared. Hashknife looked at Bud and a smile came to his face, as he said:

"Bud, I'm comin' back some day, when yo're well. And I'm goin' to knock —— out of yuh for believin' somethin' that yuh only heard one side of."

Bud blinked painfully and looked at his wife, who was coming toward him, her hands outstretched. He knew what Hashknife meant.

"All right, Hashknife," he said hoarsely. "I hope you'll come soon; and I'll take the lickin' with my hands down."

Hashknife turned and faced Breed, who gripped his hand tightly.

"Monte Sells and Brent Allard pulled out," he whispered.

"I know it," replied Hashknife. "But you don't need 'em. They were technically guilty, thasall. Mebbe they'll do better now."

"They'll have twelve hours lead," said Breed meaningly. "Mebbe this will be a lesson to 'em. It ought to, anyway. I reckon we'll have to settle up Lavelle's estate and square things with Bud. He owes Lavelle five thousand, and Lavelle owes him for a lot of cows; but we'll see that

Bud gets a square deal and that nobody suffers from it, Hartley."

HASHKNIFE nodded and walked out, with Sleepy treading on his heels. Some one called their names, but they did not heed. Came the whistle of the southbound train, late as usual. They turned and headed for the depot, where they climbed aboard the creaking smoker and sat down.

A moment later the car lurched ahead, and the lights of Modoc passed from view. Sleepy's nose squeaked on the window glass as Hashknife said—

"Gimme yore Durham, Sleepy."

"Why don'tcha buy yuh some once in a while?"

He handed over the sack and leaned back against the seat.

"Where did yuh get that rosette, Hashknife?" he asked.

"From Breed. I took one of the plain ones off my own chaps and had it in my pocket. When Breed showed me that rosette, I palmed it and put the other one in the drawer. I thought it would shock Mr. Lavelle. I had to bluff, Sleepy. I wasn't sure of it all, but I reckon I guessed right. Here's what was among that money that the hold-up man gave me that night."

Hashknife drew out the piece of silver. It was so badly worn that the engraving and inscription was hardly visible; showing that it had been carried and handled much. One side was blank. The other showed the faint outline of a shield, on which was a tiger springing to the attack.

It was surrounded with a ribbon bearing the faint inscription in Latin:

In hoc signo spes mea.

And below was the one word—LAVELLE.

"What does it mean?" asked Sleepy. "I *sabe* the Lavelle, but I dunno that other jargon."

"It's Latin, Sleepy. I had quite a time with it m'self. It's been a long time since I studied Latin, but I managed to make it out. It means—In this sign is my hope. That shield and tiger must be the family crest of the Lavelle family.

"I knew danged well that nobody but Lavelle would have it; so I had him dead to rights. He made a —— bad mistake that night. When they doped us at Black Wells, I knew they were tryin' to get it back for him. Yuh remember, I told him we were goin' there?

"I knew that Lavelle turned Bud loose that night, but it sure took me a long time to find out why. A streak of bad luck hit the Rest Ye All, and Lavelle got superstitious. I made a guess that he had told Monte Sells that the big pay-roll money was comin' through that night. He had to have that hold-up pulled off, and nobody but his own gang would do it. He had Jud Mahley with him that night, because Jud was the only one he could trust."

"And Lavelle was in love with May Daley," mused Sleepy." "That's funny, ain't it?"

"Funny?" Hashknife looked sideways at Sleepy. "What in —— is so funny about that?"

Sleepy's mouth formed an unspoken, "Oh!" and he settled down in the seat, while the car wheels sent out their *clickety-click clickety-click*, and the engine whistled dismally around the sharp curves of the Modoc hills. Hashknife sat humped in his seat, his eyes half-shut in speculation.

"Whatcha thinkin' about, cowboy?" asked Sleepy.

"About a range where there ain't no more trouble, Sleepy. I'm kinda tired of it all now. I'm gettin' so that I can't think fast, and m' gun-hand kinda cramps on me—kinda. Ho, hum-m-m!"

Sleepy glanced sideways at him and grinned softly.

"Yore medicine is still good, Hashknife. When you git so danged old that yuh can't walk no longer, I'll put yuh in a wheelchair, hang a sign around yore neck and take yuh along with me."

"A sign on my neck?" laughed Hashknife. "What do yuh mean?"

"Jist a sign," smiled Sleepy. "And on it I'll have printed: '*In hoc signo spes mea.*' Only I'll have yuh find me the Latin word for 'under' instead of 'in.' "

And the medicine-man smiled in appreciation.

ROBINSON CRUSOE BEFORE SELKIRK

by Lewis Appleton Barker

WHILE Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" has made the stay of Alexander Selkirk on the island of Juan Fernandez well known to nearly everyone, comparatively few people are aware that another man, under far less advantageous circumstances, spent three years in solitude upon the very same island, more than twenty years prior to the advent of the Scotchman.

As Selkirk, in 1704, began his four years' sojourn on the island, at his own request, he was very naturally supplied to some extent with weapons and other necessary articles that rendered his stay more easy than it would otherwise have been. His predecessor, however, had few of these, having to rely almost entirely upon his own ingenuity and exertions.

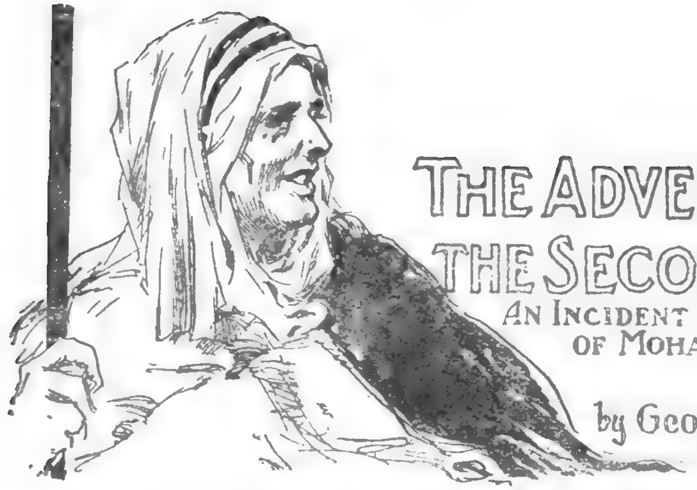
On January 11, 1681, a buccaneer ship, commanded by Captain Watling, lay at anchor at Juan Fernandez. Having but just come from the sacking of the town of La Serena, they were in great fear of pursuit by the Spaniards in force. Hence, when the crews of two boats that had been sent ashore to catch goats, were seen returning in great haste, firing muskets, and reporting that three Spanish men-of-war were heading for their anchorage, they lost no time nor did they stand upon the order of their departure. In half an hour after notice of the strange sail, all those employed on shore in watering, hunting and other occupations, were called on board with the utmost speed, the cable slipped, and the ships stood out to sea. In the hurry and excitement of all this, one of their number, a friendly Mosquito Indian, called William, who was far away in the woods hunting goats, heard nothing of the alarm.

No time could be spared in which to search for their missing comrade, and the ship sailed without him.

With this company of sea rovers was Captain William Dampier—by far the most accurate of buccaneer historians—who next visited the lonely isle in March of 1684 with Captains John Cook and John Eaton, respectively of the buccaneer ships, *Batchelor's Delight* and *Nicholas*. He informs us that several of the crew besides himself, who had been with Watling, being then with Cook, were eager to land and see if any traces of their former companion could be found. Dampier went ashore in the first boat, as did also a Mosquito Indian, named Robin, and as they approached the land, they were delighted to perceive William at the seaside awaiting their arrival. Robin was the first to leap ashore, and running to his fellow Mosquito-man, threw himself upon the earth at his feet, whereupon the latter, after helping him up and embracing him, fell flat on the ground likewise, and was in turn himself taken up by Robin.

William had lived utterly alone for more than three years. When originally left, William had possessed but a musket, a knife, a small horn of powder and a very few shot. His ammunition being soon expended, he had contrived by notching his knife to saw the barrel of his gun into small pieces, making therefrom harpoons, hooks, lances and a long knife, first heating the pieces of iron in a fire, and then hammering them into shape with stones.

He had worn out entirely the clothing with which he had landed, and now was dressed throughout in skins. Fishing lines he had fabricated out of thongs cut from the skins of seals. For a habitation he had erected, a half-mile from the seashore, a hut lined with goat skins. He slept on a couch or *barbecu* of sticks, raised about two feet from the ground and spread with skins. Having seen the two ships the day before they anchored, and correctly guessing them to be English, he had slaughtered three goats and dressed them with vegetables, thus preparing a feast for his hoped-for friends, whose welcome may be judged, from one who had not had speech with his fellow-men for so long a time.



THE ADVENTURE OF THE SECOND SCRIBE

AN INCIDENT IN THE AFFAIRS OF MOHAMED ALI

by George E Holt

Author of "The Story of the Khalifa," "The Story of the First Scribe," etc.

MOHAMED ALI walked contentedly among the olive-trees which formed a little grove back of the village in the Atlas foothills where he had found refuge from his enemies, and where he now awaited the inevitable turning of the Wheel which would restore him to his own. He hummed to himself a little song, a little song of love and fighting, which Sidi Hammo, bard of Sus, had made up a hundred years ago. He was content, this big brown-bearded outlaw, with prices upon his head—for the morning was a glorious one; little breezes played with the leaves of the olive-trees, birds sang, the smell of white narcissus came to his nose from the near-by hills—and two of his trusted friends and former officials had escaped the snares of the enemy and now dwelt safely in the village. Both had missed death narrowly, but the mantle of Allah's protection had been over them, and through this mantle the sword of no enemy can pass.

True Sid Aidomar, his *khalifa* when he, Mohamed Ali, had reigned as basha of Tangier, bore upon his right cheek, from the eye downward, a crescent-shaped white scar, souvenir of his escape from the tigers of the basha of Meknez, but the basha himself had met death from his own cats—one enemy less—while the *khalifa* had marvelously escaped, to carry to Mohamed Ali the official treasures with which he had been entrusted.

And Hamed Mortadi, the first scribe—he of only one ear—in no less miraculous a manner had been protected by Allah's power—for the Master of the Djinnoon, the black magician, had called upon his spirits to serve Mohamed Ali, and the first scribe had walked from his prison, and from the very Shadow of Death, to safety. Others were yet to come in answer to Mohamed Ali's summons—the second scribe, and the third scribe, and the captain of the guards, each of whom, when Mohamed Ali had been forced hurriedly to evacuate the basha's offices and residence, had been entrusted with some part of the treasures, archives, or other possessions of their chief, to guard with life itself, until the call should go forth from Mohamed Ali that account should be rendered for the various talents.

But, although they had not yet come, Mohamed Ali knew little uneasiness on that score; he felt deeply that the protection of Allah was about them all—that He had smiled upon them thus far, and that there manifestly was no reason for Him suddenly to begin to frown. Mohamed Ali believed very sincerely that Allah differed little, in some things, from His creatures—and he believed that to trust his god was to have that trust held inviolable.

Wherefore he was not at all surprized when he saw approaching him through the olive grove a figure whom he recognized as Sid Walid M'Barak, his second scribe, followed at a little distance by the *khalifa* and the first scribe.

"The Adventure of the Second Scribe," copyright, 1924, by George E. Holt.

"*Mah'kbabek!*" cried Mohamed Ali, and strode swiftly to meet him. "Welcome—and praise be to Allah for His goodness!"

"Praise be to Allah!" echoed M'Barak. "But for His mercy, indeed I should not be here."

And he grasped the hands which Mohamed Ali held out to him.

Then came the others with similar greetings, and the four found seats upon the ground beneath the olive-trees.

"You came safely, then, from Tangier?" said M'Barak to the first scribe.

"With the aid of Allah, yes," was the reply. "And you? What came to you after we parted there?"

"Since then—" A smile flashed across the face of the second scribe—"Since then I have been—a woman." His smile changed to laughter at the puzzled faces of his friends.

"But it is true," he assured them. "I do not jest. I have worn the *haik* and slippers of a woman, and covered my face modestly, thus——"

He drew the edge of his hood across his face beneath the eyes, dropped his eyelids coyly over black eyes, and then flashed such a coquettish look at Mohamed Ali that the olive-grove resounded with the bandit's laughter.

"And more," continued M'Barak. "Oh, much more. Besides which I spent some little time in the harem of the basha of Tangier."

"And lived to tell of it! *Allah kerim!*" exclaimed Mohamed Ali, while the others stared at M'Barak in silent amazement. "Here indeed is a tale—a tale to go well with those of tigers and *djinnoon.* Walid M'Barak in women's garments! I must remember that trick; it may serve *me* some time. Walid M'Barak in the basha's harem! This small, delicate, lady-like Walid M'Barak—who once, to my certain knowledge, because I saw, killed five of his enemies with five shots from his pistol, in as much time as is required to count the fingers of one hand. Humph! Surely Allah jested when he fashioned you!"

Mohamed Ali's comment was not without justice. M'Barak was anything but a big man. His hands and face were as delicately fashioned as those of a woman; his eyes were a woman's eyes, and his complexion was as fair as that of an English girl. He was yet young, and no beard nor mustache had come to spoil the fresh texture of his skin. Wherefore he was apt to be misjudged—to the prompt discomfiture of the person who misjudged him. Even his voice, as he took up his story in response to the demand of Mohamed Ali, had a feminine quality. Yet among all of Mohamed Ali's friends and followers, none was more dangerous, none more quick to resent affront, nor with more ability to punish.

"But it was nothing, my friends—nothing more than an amusing game—with no chance for things which set a man's blood to running.

He took up his tale with passionless, languid words, in which there was more than a hint of laughter—at himself as well as at others. "*Aiwa*—it has been my fate to be a woman for a little while. The manner of it was this—a cigaret, if you please, Sid Aidomar. Thanks. After you left me, in my house in Tangier, Sid Hamed, came people of the basha making inquiries along the street. Standing upon my balcony, reflecting upon the vagaries of life, I overheard them. The inquiries seemed intimately to concern you—wherefore I went quickly inside and closed the shutters, and was about to depart for another place. Because, as you know, I am not one who is much inclined toward promiscuous conversation—and the basha's men seemed to me to be rude persons, who spoke with all whom they chanced to meet." M'Barak smiled whimsically at the grins of his friends.

"But," he continued, "when I descended the back stairway of my house I encountered two men ascending. I explained to them that there was no one at home in the house, as I had just knocked upon the upper door, and had received no response. But they were suspicious, or overzealous, and one of them detained me while the other thrust a lantern into my face. And, as ill-luck had it, he who did so was one of the basha's *maghaznis*, who knew me very well.

" '*Ya la tif!*' said he. 'This is Sid M'Barak, Mohamed Ali's second scribe. Assuredly there must be some connection between him and the first scribe, for whom we search. We have no orders to seek you—nevertheless I think you are an enemy of my master, and no doubt we shall find the first scribe in your house, the door of which I shall now have broken down—unless you give me the key.'

"Now, the house was not mine, but I saw no reason to have the door ruined, wherefore I gave the *maghazni* the key, and as he started up the stairs I tripped up the other fellow who held me. But again luck was against me, for he caught my ankle and brought me down, and in a breath his companion was sitting upon me. So—*hmph!* They tied me up, searched the house, found nobody—and carried me off to the presence of a most angry basha. Now, Sid Mortadi, what was the cause of the basha's anger that night? Had you tricked him, or had some one else?"

"Whom did he accuse?" asked the first scribe, with a smile.

"He accused no one. He cursed. He cursed you and one whom he called the Master of the Djinnoon, and Mohamed Ali—and others whose names I have forgotten."

"And then?" asked Mohamed Ali, seriously, his eyes fixed upon the face of his second scribe.

"And then," echoed M'Barak, laughing at the concerned face of his chief. "Then he turned his attention more definitely to me." He made a wry face. "Allah! Those *maghaznis* of his are strong men! Fortunately the cloth of my *sulham* was not so strong."

He made a twisting motion with his right hand, which explained better than words the trick of torturing a man by seizing his *sulham* at the back of his neck and twisting it until his breath is choked off.

"After which," continued M'Barak, "my arms."

And again his listeners needed no explanation of a form of torture in which the arms are twisted backward and upward until they almost leave their sockets.

"Then, these ceremonies having been concluded, and the hour being late, I was thrown into a little room in the basha's palace, the door was locked upon me and I heard a guard stationed outside.

"Perhaps an hour, perhaps two, had passed, when the door of the room in which I lay was opened. I heard the shuffle of slippers, and rose swiftly in the darkness to defend myself as best I could against the unseen. But the footsteps paused and a voice whispered.

"'Are you Sid Walid M'Barak?' the whisper asked. When I replied that I was, 'Allah be praised then,' said the whisper. And I heard the door close gently.

"'I am—I am Yousef Tizniti,' said a low voice, now, 'and your friend, Sidi.'

"Now I did not know any Yousef Tizniti—although his name told me that he came from Tiznit, where once I lived, and for a little space I was puzzled—yes, and suspicious. But, my friends, now comes a peculiar thing—a thing which should teach us that even the least crumb of the bread of kindness cast upon the waters of life may, even after many years, return us a millionfold. Truly the ways of Allah are beyond all comprehension. Witness this: When I was a boy in my father's house—it must have been fifteen years ago—there came one day a blind man led by a little fellow about my own age. Naturally we fed them and let them remain as long as they would. While they were there the old man fell sick and died and my father found for the boy a home with some of his friends. Shortly thereafter my father also died and we others went to live in another town, so that I forgot the blind man's little boy. But through the will of Allah he lived, and the road of his life caused him to become a soldier of the basha at Tangier and to be stationed as guard outside my door, on the night of which I tell. Wonderful are the ways of Allah!"

Three heads nodded agreement.

"Being assured now that here was a friend in time of need, I laid aside my fears and gave thought to the business of making my escape. But Yousef assured me that for me to walk forth—even to fight my way—out of the palace, would be impossible; that all of the basha's guards were on duty, and that no man could enter or leave the building or the grounds except past the captain of the guards himself. For a little while it seemed as though Allah had sent me a friend in jest only, but I had no sooner thought this than my distrust was overthrown."

"'Hark, Sidi,' said Yousef. 'I think I see a way.' And he told me of his plan. It seemed to me a good plan, wherefore Yousef went away for a little while—yes, leaving my door unguarded; that was a risk he took in the name of friendship!—quickly to return with the robe and slippers of a woman."

"And this Yousef?" interrupted Mohamed Ali. "I would have him among my followers. Assuredly you did not leave him in the palace to suffer for your escape?"

"No," replied M'Barak. "Assuredly no.

He said that the chief who was good enough for me was more than good enough for him, and that he would seek you soon and pledge his allegiance.

"Now you well know that as long as the face is covered and the lips keep silent, such a dress would be perfect concealment for Shaitan himself. Perhaps my ankles are not the ankles of a woman, but I wrapped the *haik* about me so that it fell low. Besides which, there are women who have as small ankles as mine—although they are not popular— Thus arrayed, I waited until Yousef gave me the signal that the way was clear, and started forth, my story ready, should I be accosted—and Yousef's knife handily arranged beneath my garment.

"Almost it seemed as though I would reach the gardens safely—and there would be at least a chance, I thought. In the palace I passed several guards stationed before various doors—I think the basha had more than one prisoner in the palace that night—but except for a passing look or a scurrilous word, nothing occurred. But at the very portal to the big gardens a guard stopped me and inquired whence I came and whither I went. He was young and good looking, this guard, and in his eyes I saw that which gave me courage—and an idea. Wherefore, while I told him that I was a sister of one of the other guards, who had come with the news of the serious illness of our father, also I took occasion a little to uncover my eyes, that he might see admiration in them. He was not slow to take note—most speedily he took note—and I had opportunity to observe how foolish a man may be. And at last:

" 'The hour is late, little one,' said he. 'You do not seek the garden at this hour of the night, assuredly.'

" 'No,' I told him. 'I do not seek the garden, but the gate to the street, so that I may go to my house. It is a long way and I am very tired.'

" 'Poor child,' he said. 'Why do you not rest a little first—after which, I myself will take you to your house.' And he looked at me with eyes that flamed. And flame for flame I threw back at him. Then, as women do, I laughed a little, and made as though to pass on. But he stopped me with a hand upon my shoulder.

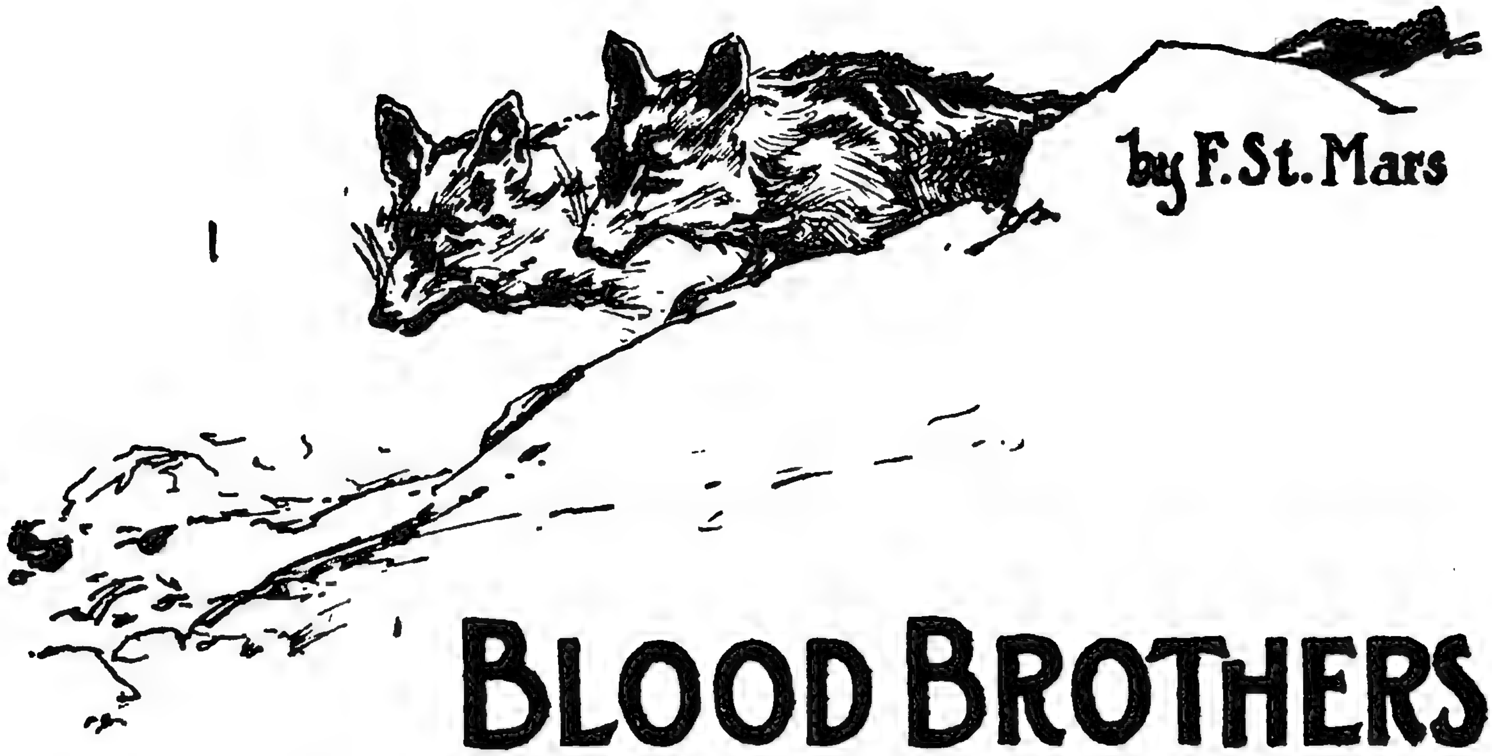
" 'Go not,' he said. 'Near by are the women's quarters—the *harem* of the palace. There is no one in them now save the female servants, for the basha has not yet brought his wives from Fez. Therefore is the harem unguarded; all will be asleep, and you may safely enter and wait for me. You will not have to wait long.' And his eyes glowed again.

"Wherefore, my friends, I took leave of him with another glance, now modest—shy—sought the door he pointed out to me, and entered, and in a little room found a mattress upon which I rested. But I did not sleep.

"I know not how much time passed, perhaps a little more than an hour, when he came for me. But although he came quietly, one of the women was awakened, and called out, which was fortunate, because it caused us to go without delay. This, I am sure, the guard did not relish; but there was still—a long deserted street.

"And so, following him I passed through the garden and through the gate, concealing my face carefully from the captain of the guards, to whom my companion explained the matter—although in what manner I do not know, except that the captain laughed—and we passed into the safety of the streets. There I took the lead, keeping a little way ahead of him, until we reached a narrow thoroughfare where all was very dark and very quiet. There he laid a hand upon my robe. It came off very easily—so easily that in a handful of seconds he found himself wrapped like a mummy in five yards of woolen cloth. Then I set him up in a doorway, cursing horribly but indistinctly through the *haik*. Better than cords to hold a man is five yards of thick woolen cloth to roll him in.

"I left him there and went my way—but I fear that he has lost his faith in women."



by F. St. Mars

BLOOD BROTHERS

Author of "The Edged Tool," "The Highwayman of the Marsh, etc."

So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise hillmen desire their hills.—RUDYARD KIPLING.

IT IS a fact that from the very start he was different from the rest—different in size, in temper, in color and in brain-power. For one thing he was the first to be born and the first to feed. Indeed, by the time his two sisters and three brothers had put in an appearance on the bare, dry earth of the den constructed by the cunning old vixen, some way in and higher than its two entrances—all of which were enlarged rabbit holes—he was ready for a second feed. Thus he was a feed in front of his fellows.

Moreover, he was not ten minutes old when with true puppy foolishness he had dabbed his quite unfox-like snub nose on a spider, who promptly injected a jawful of formic acid into that nose, a fact which gave him a far greater inducement to try to struggle to his uncertain feet than he would otherwise have had for weeks. Naturally he squeaked just the same as his brothers and sisters would have done; but there was this difference. Instantly he stiffened; a light stole into his baby eyes, which seemed quite out of place there, and with an obviously vicious though absurd dab that was perhaps meant to be a snap—though truly it may have been but accidental sprawl—he abolished that spider out of hand. Then, still laughably trying apparently to bristle with temper, he bored a brother out of the way and sprawled himself out over the greater part of the most eligible—from a fox cub's point of view—portion of his mother.

Now some people averred that it was the facts set out above or some such facts that were responsible for the strange difference between himself and his mother and brothers and sisters, which became very noticeable in him in after life; but this is doubtful.

The "earth" of the old vixen was in an oak hanger on the slope of a hill; under bracken it was, and flanked with a *chevaux-de-frise* of holly, and was a much higher situation than that generally chosen for littering by the lowland vixen, such as she was. Behind the den northward the ground rose and rose to moors, running back to a wild succession of hills, behind which on a clear day you could see the grim, blue, rugged outlines of the mountains. Below, the ground fell to the rich pastures and sheltered coverts of the lowlands, to which properly that vixen belonged.

Now three nights later I was lying outside that fox den watching, when I beheld, sneaking up-hill through the trellised moonlight, the lightly built, sinuous form of a fully grown dog fox. Red he was, big-eared, white-fanged, with black on his nose and his feet and ears and white on his under parts, but with a black tip to his tail, which is rare, I believe.

He was carrying a dead, half-grown rabbit, this dog fox, and it he dropped near the mouth of the den, and sitting down, tongue lolling, ears pricked, stared in with the intelligent eyes of all the dogs.

Now fate and his father's sins have cursed the fox with an odor which is—rampant, to speak the least of it. The hunter indeed can often tell of a morning if a fox has passed that way overnight; and this scent is especially appalling should Master Reynard happen to be excited or annoyed at all.

I merely mention this fact here because at that instant, though full fifty yards from the fox and well up-wind at that, I suddenly became aware of the very pungent smell of a fox near at hand and, turning my head cautiously, was just in time to see a great, lean, heavy old gray hill fox disappearing over the edge of a boulder. A moment later, and, with a snarl which startled even the watcher, this gray beast appeared again, springing out from behind the roots of a gnarled oak some four yards back of the red fox sitting facing the hole.

I had just time to see that as he bounded along this mountain fox dropped a dead grouse which he was carrying, when he was upon the back of the red fellow like a gray whirlwind. And then—and then a cloud put out the moon as if a black curtain had fallen, leaving the rest to the secrecy of the inky darkness.

At length the cloud drew off; the moon filtered down once more; and the ghostly paths and clearings, gnarled boles and mossy roots of the hanger became again lit up. Then I saw that the red fox was gone—where I could never tell—that a dead grouse, as well as a dead rabbit, now lay on the ground near the gaping mouth of the den and that the old gray hill fox was standing alone, full in the moonlight about sixty yards down-hill. Then he turned and climbed slowly up-hill, passing close to me as he went and giving me full opportunity to see how much heavier and more powerful—though, as we know, slower—are these gray hill foxes than their lowland brethren.

* * *

NINE days later the litter of fox cubs was still there in the deep earth in the oak hanger. Almost pitch dark was their home and smelling till further orders of odors not a few; but, could one have peered in, all one would have seen of them was a heap of slaty-blue fur, out of which poked here and there a snub, blunt nose, which heap, especially when at dawn the old vixen came in from her hunting, broke apart into six little, tumbling, fat, round bodies, not a bit like what one would have expected young foxes to be.

At this time, too, one thing was noticeable, and that was the fact that the offerings brought surreptitiously by night by father fox and placed outside the earth consisted sometimes of lowland rabbits and sometimes of highland grouse and once a mountain leveret.

Then came an afternoon, some four weeks after, when in a burst of golden sunshine following upon a wild mid-April shower, like smiles after grief; when all the earth smelled good and every leaf tossed away a jeweled tear, we discover our fox cub suddenly standing bang in the center of the "earth's" entrance. Drooping fern and embossed lichen and pale primrose made a frame for his round little, wise little head as he stood there, his sturdy forelegs splayed abroad, taking stock of the great world.

He saw the rooks shoot over, one after the other, from the shoulder of the hanger, like divers following in succession off the same board; he saw the wind shake out the dainty wayfaring tree in pearling silver and set the yellow daffodils a-nodding; saw, too, the first breaking foam of the blossoming hawthorns; rested his eye on the deep golden splashes of the massed dandelions and beheld a wild cherry standing in the pale gauze of its own cast-off bridal veil.

He noted the brilliant salmon and blue of an amorous bullfinch set against the green of oak leaves; marked the flitting of the noisy long-tailed and blue tits—like great bees among the upper twigs—and understood with quick apprehension the scolding of a nervous squirrel with young. His eyes followed anxiously the acrobatics of a wood warbler, "a passionate little pilgrim of song," as it climbed mouselike about the resinous twig-heads, hunting its microscopical quarry; turned sharply in the direction of the sudden hollow, sensuous coo of a wood pigeon, and turned again with lightning, highly strung rapidity, as he snapped at a passing orange-tip butterfly.

He saw it all—*his* wild now, henceforth and always; his wild "that his being fulfils." Hah! He sniffed long, loud and insolently, for verily had his lot fallen on fair ground; and he expressed, as eloquently as if in words, his conviction that it was good.

Next instant, quick as though he had spun on his heel where he stood, bristling, ears flat, eyes narrowed, lips unrolled, as a shadow fell suddenly athwart the den's mouth. Five vanishing tails at the same moment represented his brothers and sisters, who had ventured to peer out behind him.

But it was only his mother, whose thirst had sent her to dare the day and drink at a neighboring stream. And in her mouth, lightly held, was a nice, big, fat, kicking beetle, shining in the sunshine like a shard.

Came then instantly from the "earth" a rush of the whole litter; but full six inches in front of his fellows our cub sprang, snatching the beetle in full leap from the vixen's very jaws, and, bounding on, turned at last with a snarl to face his fellows, all pulling up, and all looking rather foolish.

Then his mother, taking no notice, went and snuffed curiously at a bunch of moss, pounced quickly, pounced once more, and unearthed a squeaking wood-mouse, and again it was our cub who snatched the prize from her very jaws with a dash and ferocity that, in so obviously a baby little beast as himself, seemed strange and out of place. His mother sprang away bristling and with a snarl, but whether in assumed or real anger I can not tell, and, going about a hundred yards off, lay down cat fashion behind a tree.

The cubs played frankly cub-like in the sunshine—a "king of the castle" game, and a sort of "touch," for even at that age they had evolved their own set games, as fox cubs and rabbits will.

A cuckoo came and sang in a tree overhead, only to be suddenly driven away by a woodpecker who had her nest there; and then, as if the laughing cry had called them, a pair of starlings came and waged war with her for possession of the coveted nesting-hole till they got it, and held it for a few minutes only, and promptly started to throw out all the pile of wood chips that represented the woodpecker's nest; and the chips, falling, attracted the attention of the fox cubs, so that they stood all in a row, gazing interestedly up. Maybe they half-hoped that one of the combatants might come down wounded.

Then very quickly their mother dived forward. There was a scurry among last year's dead leaves, a snap, a snarl, the quick pattering of feet, another snap, and—their mother was returning with a chubby, pathetic, limp, dead baby rabbit in her jaws.

It was our own fox cub who met her halfway, our own fox cub with little ears flat, lips already lifted and little body already stiffened for that impetuous rush which, even at that age, had begun to show itself. But this time it was the vixen who did the dashing, who, bristling and snarling, was upon him almost before he could move, and who, bowling him, squeaking, over and over on his back, held him firmly under her right forepaw, protesting and wildly kicking, on his back, while his brothers and sisters clumsily learned the correct way to carve the bunny. Perhaps the vixen thought that there was no need to teach him—no more there was apparently. He knew too much already, it seemed.

THE days passed and with them the Spring. Summer came on apace, bringing the still, warm nights of nightingale song, when the elders hung out their flowers like swinging fairy lamps and every thicket became a jungle and every jungle a city of nests and young birds; when in the evening the nightjars churred their droning song and the brown owls made churchyard noises in the elms till morning.

The fox cubs had often been out hunting with their mother by then, and indeed had often to hunt in a small way—at mice, young rabbits and such-like small "deer"—for themselves, for the vixen's outings alone had become lately of long duration. At last came an evening when she had gone away with the four smallest and had never come back.

The two oldest—our big cub and an odd, lean, little fellow, very black, quick as a grasshopper, and wonderfully speedy—were just out of sight of the old "earth," laying siege to a hedgehog at the time, and did not see her go. Nor did her failure to reappear by dawn trouble them much; but the complete absence of herself partly, and of their brothers and sisters especially, that next evening caused them strange and restless vulpine perturbation.

Long before the still, sad, lonely hour of dusk had fallen, when

"—Chil the Kite brings home the night
That Mang the Bat sets free"

two sharp, prick-eared heads could be seen anxiously appearing and disappearing and peering within the entrance of the old man's "earth." *And* there was a great silence within the "earth," which is always a sign of apprehension—apprehension in this case of they knew not what.

Slowly the sun slid like a copper ball behind the rim of the world, and the mists came out and crept about, and with the mists a hunting stoat. He got no farther than the mouth of the "earth," though, for our cub's lean snout shot forth, white-fanged and glistening, and the stoat invited himself at the flip of a finger into spookland, apparently, as stoats and weasels alone can. Bats came out also and began to weave mazy dances in and out among the bossed tree-boles, and over and under the masses of banked foliage, and the nightjars began to slide up and down along the flank of the hanger like huge brown moths.

Then all at once the two fox cubs were out. They had slipped from the "earth" like ghosts and were standing side by side on the mound of earth which in the beginning had been the loose soil thrown back by their mother when enlarging the rabbit's borrow for her requirements, but was now fouled, smooth and nearly flat. One of the alert little beasts faced one way, one the other—noses, eyes and ears working together in a fine Marconi installation to warn them of danger. Already that extreme wariness characteristic of the fox was awake in them. And already, too, the difference between the two was most noticeable.

Our fox was much the bigger and more "leggy." His size lay rather in length and strength of limb and bone and jaw than in body; he looked as if he could run for ever.

The other was smaller, neater, lighter, more natty and blacker; muzzle, parts of the ears, legs and even tip of the tail showed black, the rest being intense reddish brown. Our fox, on the other hand, though also red to the casual glance, showed a distinct gray tinge in some lights.

For two minutes they remained there, motionless as carven beasts; then with a wave of the brush they turned and trotted down the slope. In twenty strides the hanger had engulfed them. They moved like shadows through the undergrowth, but their course was erratic. They would stop to listen at every sound. The distant evening crow of a cock pheasant would fetch them up all standing, the *clap-clap* of a disturbed pigeon drop them flat to earth, the rustle of a bank vole among the dead leaves whisk them round like weathercocks.

They examined every trail they crossed. Nothing was unknown to them. The hanger was an open book. Who had passed through it, and what had they done, who was there now, and where—all this they knew, or nearly all. Of course they traveled up-wind, and equally of course they were quite silent—that is, as silent as the dog tribe have ever learned to be—in their movements, for it has been given to the cats alone to master the art of true silence. Anyway to our ears the fox cubs were soundless as ghosts.

Really they had set out with the idea of trailing their mother and brothers and sisters; but the trail was old, the scent had floated some way and become blurred, as were their memories beginning to be blurred also. It was the old story of the wild. The time had come when the word "mother" was burning itself out in their brains, never more to be relighted. It needed only the incident that immediately followed to extinguish it for ever.

Passing a great break of clinging, scented brier and bracken—aglow in the gathering gloom with blossoms looking like pale lamps—both foxes so suddenly stopped and swung round, tails and heads out, that it appeared as if they were really a pair of weathercock foxes come down to walk about, after all. There was a rabbit in that brier path.

Followed a strained, nose-working pause. Then, sinuous as a snake, the little red cub—called Red Cub henceforth to distinguish him from our Gray Cub—slipped noiselessly in. It was a thorny path in very truth; but these, it seemed, had begun to be his specialty.

Our cub did not go in. He turned and, prancing his way along, light as a beast of cork, slipped almost silently round the outside of the patch. By the look of him it seemed as if he were watching and could follow with his own eyes his brother, now buried yards deep and past all finding in the appalling tangle. Perhaps indeed he could follow him with his nose.

What the maneuver was and why it was carried out with instant mutual understanding as if the beasts had spoken, became at once apparent. There was a bounce, a rustle inside the brier patch and a drumming sound, which announced the fact that bunny had been making depositions to escape.

Gray Cub left off following the movements of his brother and turned his whole attention to the rabbit. Whereupon a hunt within the brier patch began. The object in view was to make bunny break cover; but bunny clearly had, or appeared to have, some dim intuition of the gray death, now fairly prancing with excitement, that was waiting for her outside. Now she would! Now she wouldn't!

Gray Cub nearly went delirious. A dozen times, with masterly skill that must have been born in him, Red Cub pushed the rabbit to the very mouth of some one or other of the numerous rabbit-runs that cut into the brier patch, and a dozen times she broke back with a crash of undergrowth. Indeed there began to be a serious likelihood that she would allow herself to be what huntsmen call "chopped in cover"—what irony in the case of the first serious hunt of young foxes!—and never give Gray Cub a chance of showing what he was made of after all.

Then suddenly she broke out. There was only a momentary winking as of a white powder puff, a drumming, and she was gone. But Gray Cub had gone with her—you could hear him going down through the hanger like a greyhound—and in a second later Red Cub, smashing his way out blindly and fairly whimpering with eagerness, was at their heels, going down-hill like the wind. Clean through the hanger they shot and out on to the sloping grass field below at dizzy speed.

Poor bunny never had the ghost of a chance because Gray Cub rushed her with such extraordinary fury—a way he had which has been noted before—that she never found time to dodge. Thus she was forced against her will to keep going down-hill—this was unintentional strategy on Gray Cub's part probably—and was much hampered by that, owing to the disproportionate length of her hind legs. Had it been an up-hill scurry she would have shown to far better advantage, in fact. But as it was she was bowled over at full speed in mid-field by Gray Cub, and in a clean, precise fashion that augured well for his success in hunting in after life.

Red Cub, shooting smoothly and easily over the sward like some red arrow—he became famous for this gait later—joined him at once, and the two sank snarling into the shadowland of the nearest cover to feed. They fed, and pheasants going to roost above paused, to palpitate and peer down into the undergrowth at the grisly sounds. They fed, and a squirrel improved the occasion to come low on a branch and swear at their green eyes, glinting in the gloom beneath. They fed, and— Great bumble bees and badgers! What was that now?

They left off feeding as if jerked off with a lever. They stood rigid—at gaze. They "froze" into absolutely instant cessation of all movement. And so had the squirrel; his remarks were shut off almost with an audible snap.

Some thing, some big thing, was coming down the hanger, breathing audibly through its nose as it came. It was not long coming either; for in a second it had shot by, and they could hear it turn and beat along the edge of the cover below them. Then the wave of air caused by its passage reached them; and they, too, turned, but it was up along they beat, leaving part of bunny behind for the intruder to find and eat—if he could face their clinging, nasty smell—and they vanished, flitting at great speed across the moonlit glades like twin cloud shadows. That thing was a big lurcher dog, worthy of no particular remark except that it was at once noticeable how much more noisy he was in his passage than the foxes, especially now when they wished to move quietly. When excited by hunting, however, they made as yet nearly as much noise as a small dog, and even in their most stealthy moments they were absolutely loud in comparison to the average cat.

For a mile they ran thus, then stopped to hunt systematically along the gorse that tufted the ridge of the hill. It was here that they discovered the pool, rush-choked and starred with lilies, and whilst nosing for field-mice made two acquaintances at one and the same moment; a waterhen—which is a moorhen—and a wild duck.

The latter was a very wild duck—she must have had young near—and went away over the water, beating her wings furiously on the surface in a manner that fairly made the foam fly and brought every wild creature of the night within a radius of many hundreds of yards to a sudden and attentive halt. But the moorhen ran for it—she had been out feeding—with Red Cub hard at her heels; and she went pattering, half-flying, over the pool, both foxes plunging headlong after her. They got a shock on losing their depth, and another when an eel, shiny and horrible, twined in alarmed retreat about their feet, and they landed again with splashing haste. But the memory of water-hen remained with them.

Later they happened on a little hole in a field. To the smell of the nose it was full of rabbit babies. To the feel of the paws it was filled with soft hay. They dug, however, dog fashion, to investigate, poking their noses in from time to time to snuff, also dog fashion, and digging again with renewed vigor and a little whining. They took it in turns to dig, but there was no taking it in turns when they arrived at the baby bunnies within; they became frankly wild beasts, and fought without shame for what they could get.

Later they coursed the mother, who had crept up to see what the row was about—she had herself been born only that year—but she has another hole up her sleeve, so to speak, under a near bush, and this was a long hole that they never found the end of, though they wasted hours, energy and temper over the task.

The rising sun found them curled up like round red balls, bedded in gilded bracken roofed with hawthorn and flanked and guarded by holly. It was Gray Cub who found this place and " 'lowed" that it was good, but it was Red Cub whose snaky body opened the way in. And it was the young fox—who really laid claim to the lair—that, returning with the homing bats, foolishly faced the united charge of the pair and narrowly escaped being maimed for his pains. Already, in fact, within one short night, the word had gone forth among the wild creatures of the hill that it was no good thing to face the Blood Brothers.

IT MUST have been three nights later that the two cubs left the big hill on which they had been born. As was only fitting, it was Red Cub, the plainman, who led the way. The time was between day and dark, for they had not yet learned the nocturnal necessity that in after life pressed itself upon nearly all hunted creatures.

Five miles they traveled, always making down-hill, through rampant foliage over a path strewn thick with flowers, as if it had been literally raining flowers for a week—scarlet pimpernel, fool's parsley, wild clover, toadflax, yellow lady's bedstraw, harebell, thistle, rut harrow, evening primrose, madder, Canterbury bells, cornflowers, yellow loosestrife, corn cockle, golden rod, selfheal, cruel little sundews like carpets of the blood of their victims, asphodel, pennyroyal and a hundred others. Young swallows and house martins made a ceaseless moving network in the air above; a young cuckoo "was arguing against the silences" of one lonely hill field; little parties of chortling larks rose with jerks in front of them; a dozen peewits—already beginning to flock—strung slowly by above them and were watched with great interest; and two magpies in green-black and white slashed doublets followed them for some distance, fanning their long tails, chasing birds for fun and gamboling like mischief-loving children.

Then on a sudden where white-blossomed privet, steeple-like juniper, birch, aspen and alder stood about in loose profusion, Red Cub stopped dead. Gray Cub checked too, 'twixt stride and stride, behind him. You picture them, forelegs apart, heads lowered, noses working, fur a-lift along their backs, long brushes dropped—motionless. Then in a whirl you see them going hard away down the slope, stretched low, brushes waving in the breeze.

They passed as they went a red stag of two Summers, moving—one can not say that a stag does anything so vulgar as merely walk—up the hill with that incomparable, haughty grace peculiar to all the deer. Four hundred yards farther down they both stopped and swung round together—brushes stuck straight out now, heads in line with brush, one paw uplifted—to stare back at the spot that had given them alarm. The stag had nearly reached it now. He did reach it, and instantly he bounded straight up into the air, a prodigious leap as if he had been shot, and went crashing away along the hill at full gallop till he vanished.

Then the foxes turned, too; and continued their way, trotting quickly dog-fashion down to the lowlands. Yet there had been nothing there in that spot in the open thicket to harm either fox or stag at that moment—nothing alive at all. They had simply crossed the recent scent of a man. If it had been the scent of the Evil One himself it could not have had much more effect.

Anon they came to a new land of big fields with shaven hedges and ditches, trim and tasseled coverts and cattle-trampled gateways, farmsteads lying low among banks of trees, and hay and straw ricks railed around and warm. Red Cub sniffed appreciatively. This was his home. Gray Cub fidgeted uneasily and set back his ears. This was not by any means his home.

Then a partridge in a newly mown hayfield creaked out his unoiled call, and a pheasant—deep red-bronze against the intense yellow-green—puffed out his chest and crowed. And in the dusk already gathering about the ditches the brothers dropped flat.

Five minutes later, still flat, they were edging, one behind the other, just inside the line of tall grass which cut the field in half between the already mown and the as yet unmown hay.

Ten minutes later they were half-way out along this dividing line, quite invisible, lying down in the long grass. And seven partridges were working in line—you know the way; they run a little way and crouch, run and crouch again—back from the open field to the shelter of the standing crop—straight toward the flattened fox cubs.

The pheasant had already risen with a tremendous commotion and whirred back to the nearest copse to roost; a tiny atom of a harvest mouse was peering out of its exquisite ball of a nest, slung on the grass stems directly above the heads of the crouching cubs, and something unseen went rustling mysteriously away in the high grass behind them, which was, I fancy, a corncrake.

The partridges must have been very close now, though hard to see from the foxes' lowly position. Then on a sudden one loomed up, looking three times its size to those who were nearly on a level with the ground, ran nearly bang on top of them and yelled aloud. Followed a rustle as the cubs rose together, a pounce on the part of Red Cub, a chorus of grating alarm cries, a furious whir of wings, and—the dwindling of those whirrings and that rasping protest of the old cock-partridge somewhere behind the next hedge. One looked, and if one had been very quick indeed one would have just caught a fleeting glimpse of two elusive fox cubs, each with a partridge in his jaws, leaping back into the cover of the high standing crop.

Next night when it was quite dark four and fifty rabbits, feeding out in a grass field, suddenly turned and bolted hedgeward—their white, bobbing tails looking like the grounding of a wave. And Gray Cub came prancing down the side of the hedge as if his feet were on springs. By this one guessed that Red Cub was within, doing the driving part. And he drove. Oh, yes; he drove all right—too much.

First there came bundling down into the ditch a low, long, gray, chattering devil. Gray Cub halted instanter in his tracks and snarled. The devil may or may not have heard the snarl. It came, still chattering with rage, up out of the ditch and galloped low and clumsily straight at the fox.

Gray Cub invited himself out into the middle of the field, spun about and sat down with lolling tongue to see what would happen. But nothing happened except that the devil went right on, lumbering away into the haze, and Gray Cub returned to see what Red Cub had done.

It was his first experience of badgers, and he probably voted them —— bad beasts, which they are if upset, but no cowards, and for that they held in future his entire respect. I fancy the badger must have mistaken the confusion of rabbits and the fox within for the hunting of dogs.

Red Cub, however, appeared to have got himself into trouble too. He could be heard jumping and squeaking about in the dark tangle within, and Gray Cub—after one mad scurry after a bolting rabbit that ended in a hole—wormed his way into the well-like blackness between the twisted stems to assist.

He found Red Cub, somewhat bloodied about the nose—this he could smell, not see—at argument with a family of hedgehogs, who remained quite still in a spherical form and said nothing. It was strange that Red Cub never could leave hedgehogs alone. Some domestic dogs can not either.

Gray Cub, on the other hand, was hedgehog fool-proof. He sniffed contemptuously at each spiny pig, tentatively rolled one over with a cautious paw, tried to insert his nose where the orifice was revealed, snarled savagely at the prick of a spine as the rolled one tightened up, so to speak, and, turning, tried to coax Red Cub away. Finally Red Cub went away, sneezing prodigiously and stopping every few yards to rub his nose with his forepaw.

Of course every rabbit would be by this time ensconced deep in a hole past all finding, and Red Cub's idiotic weakness had spoiled the hunt, and— Whiskers and weasles! No, it hadn't though.

Yap! Gray Cub sprang forward, crashing and blundering among the bushes as a fantom bobbed up through a hole out of the earth at their feet and faded into the inky shadow. Red Cub said nothing; but in ten seconds he was well in front of his brother, going through the tangled stuff as if born there. There was a squeal of thin, high piteousness, and Red Cub swung out on to the close-cropped grass outside the hedge with the rabbit in his jaws.

Gray Cub snarled.

Instantly, as if the death cry of the rabbit had called it, there came up out of a rabbit-hole a narrow, long little beast, set on legs so low that he almost seemed to touch the ground. He stopped as he saw the two blotched, dark fox forms moving about and sat up on his haunches kangaroo fashion. And both cubs could plainly see that in that dim light his eyes shone red. He was a stoat.

Then he dived again below. There was a pause of exactly one minute and four seconds, during which both could distinctly hear the cows cropping the grass out in the field on the other side of the hedge, and there was a rumble from another rabbit-hole, and Gray Cub, diving forward, was just in time neatly to snap up a second bolting rabbit.

Evidently the little, small, low beast with the eyes that shone red was obligingly driving out rabbits; but not for them, of course. He was at his own way of hunting, which was not theirs, and how long he might have continued to amuse them there is doubtful, because an owl suddenly passed on hasty, silent wings; a hare, going like the wind, followed; a peewit cried aloud suddenly in the next field, and a twig cracked like a pistol-shot.

The foxes melted out along the hedge, and when the man arrived a moment or two later everything was deserted and silent as death.

MANY nights passed in cool silence, and many still brazen days of heated stagnation, and only the rabbits had cause to complain of the presence of the Blood Brothers during that time. When not actually hunting—or playing, for they still were young enough to feel the tonic of a romp—they slept in an evacuated badger "set" (den) discovered by Red Cub as a chance find while prospecting for beetles.

Then all at once on *the* fateful night they leaped into publicity. Fate, one of whose other names is Chance, planned it, I think, but they were willing accomplices.

It was a lugubrious evening after a day of still, copper-colored heat. It seemed as if there was a great weight on the brows of nature; as if the very winds down to the little Summer breeze were shackled and pinioned, and one felt that—

"Tonight God knows what things shall tide;
The Earth is racked and faint—
Expectant, sleepless, open-eyed;
And we, who from the Earth were made,
Thrill with our Mother's pain."

The Blood Brothers were out early. News—which runs through the wild like fire—there was of their having been seen here and there even so early as broad afternoon—sneaking, furtive, hungry, restless, dangerous, like bad spirits apprehensive of they knew not what. Here it was a blackbird who had caught sight of a pair of cruel eyes with elliptical pupils, watching him intently from under the cover of some tangled fence; there it was a rabbit who had fled incontinently at the instance of a grinning mask thrust suddenly out of a bracken clump, and again it was a wary old wood-pigeon who had spotted a bold brush with a black tip—black-tipped brushes are rare, as I mentioned before—vanishing silently into some standing corn.

Even so, however, everything would have gone right if it hadn't been for the gleany and the elder-tree. If you don't happen to know what a gleany is, it's a guinea-fowl—but they stick to the French name in the west of England to this day. And the elder was very much of an elder, with huge buttressed trunk and great limbs stretching out horizontally over the road broad enough for a man to walk along. Behind the elder-tree and not many yards away rose the wall of the farm-house, and the farmer could look straight out of his bedroom window into the heart of the tree foliage.

Nevertheless some people will not entirely exonerate Gray Cub. To which it may be answered that Gray Cub, whatever he ought to have been, was undoubtedly a hill fox, with the soul of a hill fox and the tastes of the same.

Now hill foxes get more birds than rabbits to eat. With lowland foxes, like Red Cub for example, it is the reverse. And as a general working rule a fox loveth to eat that which he can get, and always has got plenty of, and with little trouble.

Still, it was the gleany's fault, for nobody asked him to speak; nobody asked him to lure the hens to roost in the tree because the nights were hot and the regularly ordained fowl-house stuffy, and if he had not spoken, probably everything would have been all right.

The sun went down in wrath, and a dun-colored cloud about the size of a man's two fists showed crouched flat on the horizon; that was all. The tense, throttled, heated stillness was appalling. One felt one wanted to yell out and couldn't. Not a leaf moved. All the wild seemed to be crouched flat with breath held, watching, waiting for something to happen. And the flies conspired with the charged atmosphere to send one mad.

At ten o'clock, as near as may be, Gray Cub, with Red Cub following, passed noiselessly beneath the elder-tree. Their heads were down, their tongues out, their brushes nearly in the dust.

The spell of apprehension in the air affected the foxes strangely. They could not keep still. Twenty times they had been seen in different hedge-rows that night. But it must have been the electricity in the air, his evil genius or his father's Kismet, that prompted Gray Cub to follow up the smell of geese, ducks, turkeys, poultry and pigeons which hung round the paddock and orchard adjoining the farmyard.

Even then they would have passed right on, alarmed at the heavy man-scent, if——

"Come back!" cried that fool of a gleany almost exactly above their heads and a little behind.

Gray Cub moved from the spot where the call caught him in the road to the middle of a patch of "escaped," flowering, huge-leaved rhubarb by the garden rails. Red Cub shifted at one bound to the shelter of some foxgloves, whose tall spires shone in the hot darkness like white-pennoned lances.

Thereafter the blanketing silence shut down, and nothing was heard save the falsetto hum of the mosquitoes. But he who had quick eyes and had looked long and searchingly at foxglove clump and rhubarb patch alike would have discovered after a bit that the light from the window in the parlor of the farm-house was reflected from time to time on what looked like two small bits of green glass among both the rhubarb and foxgloves.

That, however, was the eyes of the foxes—watching, waiting as only wild members of the canine clan can wait. Thus do the timber wolves wait round the deserted, dying, ancient Indian brave. Thus do the jackals wait for the strength to ebb from the wounded antelope.

They will sit or lie thus for hours, for days, for weeks almost—grinning, grinning, grinning. If you rush at them they will melt before you, shadows into the shadow. If you sit quite back they will steal back again. They will always come back, closing in, always in, inch by terrifying inch. I have seen it—seen it even with domestic dogs. It is awful.

A door opened with a bang. A man came out, and the foxes faded into the pall-like night. The man latched the gate and went in again. In two minutes those bits of green glass were shining once more in the rhubarb and foxglove patches.

Some one, stifling in a bedroom, flung open a diamond-paned window with a clatter, and—the cubs were fifty yards off, crouched behind a yellow smudge of charlock. But they were back again in a minute or two, soundless as ghosts.

At last Gray Cub moved out from his rhubarb and flitted like a smoke-puff to the trunk of the tree. He sniffed the purple-stemmed burdocks nestled at its base and looked up. I don't know what he could see, but there was no need; his nose had already told him all that he wanted to know.

Red Cub came and sat a little behind him, his sharp snout pointing to the blue-black plush sky.

Gray Cub sank back a little on his haunches, measuring his distance. A flash of lightning, silent and terrible, ran like trickling fire all down the sky, showing plainly, as in the snap of a photo shutter, the two red beasts and an unheeded big beetle crawling between them; and in that instant Gray Cub sprang. He landed on a bold knob, where an ancient limb had at some time been broken, or cut, off five feet from the ground

He paused for a moment balancing, his big brush whirling round and round. Then in the shattering crash of thunder that followed he leaped again straight through the snapping twigs to a big bough four feet farther up. Out along this he trotted, found the quarry were still higher, and back to the main trunk. From there a further bound landed him in a fork over which he got his elbows, so to speak, and the rest was mainly kicking, scrambling, balancing and wriggling up to the great horizontal limb that ran out over the road.

Pretty well all foxes and dogs can climb if they only knew it, just as they can swim when they are forced to discover the fact. Hill foxes are especially good climbers.

"Come back! Come back!" yelled the gleany, realizing in a single instantaneous flashlight picture rendered by a second flash of lightning, the cub's grinning head peering over the curve of the grained wood.

Red Cub below heard him call.

"Come back! *Co-ca-ya-kia-ki!*"

The cry ran up into a shriek and died out into a pounding tumble of thunder, and—something heavy, warm and soft hit Red Cub smack on the mouth. Red Cub got clean across the road in what looked like a single leap before he realized that there was blood on his face, and it was not *his* blood. Then he hurried back, and a third flash of lightning discovered him standing sniffing over the ruffled dark body of a guinea-fowl lying all of a heap.

After that the storm broke with a vengeance. Blinding flash and shattering, tearing, stunning thunder followed each other in quick succession; and during the next few minutes Red Cub learned that that very ancient elder-tree bore fruit, ripe fruit, and it fell. There was the fine young Leghorn cockerel who came down like a white ghost and with not much more noise; there was the old Minorca hen, who hit him on the back of the neck and nearly knocked him silly; there was the second gleany, who flew down and went, shrieking loud enough to wake the dead if the racket hadn't been drowned by the thunder, racing all across the road with a wildly excited Red Cub tearing at its heels, and there was finally the grand old "Tom," all waving green tail and golden hackles and sharp spurs, who came down in the set jaws of a lightly springing Gray Cub—gray no longer, but carmine-splashed.

Gray Cub did not wait, however, to consider the beauties of the spoils, neither regarded the Red Cub. He had heard the dominating, hissing growing roar which the coming rain was making as it raced over miles upon miles of parched, massed foliage but above the hissing roar of the rain he had seen a bearded face peer out of the bedroom window not ten yards from, and on a level with, him; had heard the front door open softly, caught the clink of two chains dropped in haste one after the other and detected the rush and scuttle of whimpering, eager dogs excitedly released.

No; you may bet your only other dollar, Gray Cub did not wait. He went—went frankly and without shame; lay down to it and streaked as fast as his long, steely, angular legs would take him, straight away through the blinding, hissing sheets of rain—away, away, up and up and up the hill into the raging night.

On and on through the storm, his jaws tight-closed on the neck of the rooster, the rain lashing in his face, his coat, now gray-black, plastered to his lean, wiry body like a suit of skin tights, his head thrust out, big ears turned back, grand brush streaming in the wind, mile after mile, and always instinctively up-hill, galloped Gray Cub. The almost continuous lightning ripped the sky above, all round, behind and split in blinding trickles of fire on the ground ahead of him; the thunder crashed and pounded continually, and between the peals of thunder the roar of the wind among the straining, threshing trees was almost as loud.

Once with a crackle like magazine-rifle fire and a rending, smashing crash, a tree came down bodily only just behind him; once he ran nearly headlong into a lone, bellowing, half-mad bull, and once he leaped clean over a quite insane, grinning and chattering cat caught in a trap. And always behind, side by side, grim, implacable, silent as death, raced the two great dogs from the farm. Perhaps it was that the excited fox left an extra strong scent; perhaps it was the blood of the rooster—roosters do seem to bleed amazingly—sprinkled by the way that gave them the clue. But certain it is that those dogs followed in a fashion that showed this was not their first fox-hunt and unless the local master of the fox-hounds got to hear of it would most probably not be their last.

NEXT morning after it was quite light, far down on the ordered lowlands, in the heart of a homely fox-cover, within sound of almost the most famous kennels in the world, bedded on soil, in a dry, warm "earth," Red Cub lay panting, stretched at full length, thoughtfully licking his silky black forepaws. From time to time he raised his wise, alert head to stare out of the "earth" as if listening for something that he expected. But there was nothing there—only the ceaseless patter of steady rain on a thousand leaves, and the sweet, clean smell of wet earth over all.

Ten miles away, lost in the heart of the rugged hills, in a cave on the face of an overhung cliff, bedded in moss, panting and stretched full length at his ease, lay Gray Cub, thoughtfully licking his silky, gray-flecked black forepaws. From time to time, with wide ears pricked, he raised his well-shaped, knowing head to stare out down the boulder-strewn gorge as if listening for some sound that he expected. But there was nothing there—only the ceaseless babble of the mountain streams, the fierce scream of a wheeling, vast-winged buzzard and the clean, pungent smell of wet earth over all.

The terrible alliance of the dread Blood Brothers was, it would seem, at last at an end. The hills and the lowlands had claimed their own.

Slants on LIFE

by Bill Adams

To Those Who Would Follow the Sea

THIS morning I think I will let the world go by and write you a letter. You are eighteen, and, I, too, feel as though I were that fortunate age again. You have a longing to go to sea; so, too, long ago, did I. I look backward. You look forward. I have passed through that doorway which you are about to enter, and have experienced some part, at least, of my voyage through life. I wonder what memories will be yours when you are the age that I am today?

I recall most vividly the morning when the train bore me away toward a great seaport; the leafless trees along the way; the bare, Wintry fields; the smoke uprising straight from the house chimneys; even the faces of folk who went about their daily affairs. Before me adventure stretched out —life, and life's sea ahead!

A high wind buffeted about the street corners, rain-clouds hung low above the throbbing city, when, next day, I went down to the docks. Ships' masts, row on row, towered high. Spars stretched above the warehouse roofs. Here and there Blue Peter, the flag that says a ship is bound for the sea today, fluttered at a mast-head. The sirens of great steamships reverberated from the river near by. The gruff, impetuous signal blasts of tug-boats were constant. Merchants hurried along the dock-side streets, thinking only of the money that cargoes meant to them. Thin clerks sped hither and yon; pale, pasty fellows who earned their livings by figuring on the profits of merchandise belonging to other men. Strange men, old and young, went slowly by; their voices bearing a sort of rhythm; seeming to hold a fascinating kinship with the rhythm of the wind itself; their walk and accents seeming, like the wind, carefree and quite contented.

Many were bow-legged fellows, most of them square of shoulder. All walked nonchalantly, and seemed, like the wind again, not to greatly care what turning they took. There were swart men, black-headed, beady-eyed. There were tall, blue-eyed men, whose long hair was butter-yellow. Men of every girth and stature, of every tongue and every sea-coast tribe between the North Cape and Puntas Arenas were there, about me—seafaring men who knew what lay "outside!" Men to whom streets, buildings, warehouses and every dock-side tumult were but so many attributes of the majesty of the sea: men to whom the sea was life, to whom life was the sea—sailors!

This foggy morning, here in my warm room, the smell of breakfast coming from my kitchen, flowers growing beneath my window, a flat and cultivated country stretching for many miles about me, I hear

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still, as I heard them then, those mystical sounds that are heard only at the rim of the sea. I smell the strange scents of ships—of rigging, rope and canvas, of crates and bales and barrels; fresh paint upon the sides of ships but just come from dry-dock; barnacles and dying sea-growths upon the rising hulls of ships discharging cargoes from across the world. I smell tobacco smoke, and hear the smoker's easy accents—some man of the sea, into whose bearing has come, from long service of her, somewhat of her great peacefulness.

Two lads pass, each carrying a caged cockatoo. Clerks and merchants hasten on, with no time for laughter or for trifles. A powerful tug passes through the dock, and at the throb of her twin screws an empty clipper-ship lifts lightly upon the trivial waves she makes in passing. It is as though that lofty ship were doing a step, an amused dance, to entertain her sisters who lie near by; sisters who, like herself, have danced to the winds, to the upflung ridges, of every ocean.

Ah, I wish that I were back! I would start all over once again—once more to learn the bitter misery of toil, of warfare with terrific elements; to know hunger, thirst, weariness, disaster, pains and the many, many attributes of our majestic sea.

Only through strength may peace come to man. Strength must be bought by resisting miseries. There is no strength like the sea's strength; no beauty like her's; no peace like her's—the sea a harsh teacher, a stern mistress; bringing to those who would love her, suffering. He who would love her must endure her buffetings. All beauty, all marvel, is enwrapped in pain. Only through endurance does payment come.

At sea one was drawn into a sort of kinship with the stars. One became, in some degree, a fellow wanderer with the traveling winds. There was a certain gentleness about the life of a sailor. One was brought to, perhaps, unsuspected understanding of the littleness of man's affairs.

There was peace under the night skies at sea; however hard the howl of the wind, a confidence that life was good. Life became a worthy, fine thing when one stood, alone, half-frozen, even hungry, at the helm of some storm-lashed ship. The gale blew through one, as though the body were not; as though it were the spirit alone, the invincible spirit, will man but have it so, of man to whom the wise wind cried, so cheerily though so cold.

Perhaps this writing of mine would seem strange, fantastic, mad, to most men. Most men have parents, homes, love of the earth, and hearth. The sea was my parent, and the gale my hearth-stone; all wandering men my kin.

Perhaps, after all, these things, even this sea, the life we lead, the loves we know, are but trivial things, and we, all of us, but adolescent youths to whom shall come, upon some later day, when we have left these bodies, a strident cry to call us outward upon farther and more real adventurings?

Life has been, is, an adventure. Death also will be an adventure. Each is a necessary part of the other. This is one of those great secrets confided to one by the sea, at night, under infinite stars, by day beneath her bright sky purities.

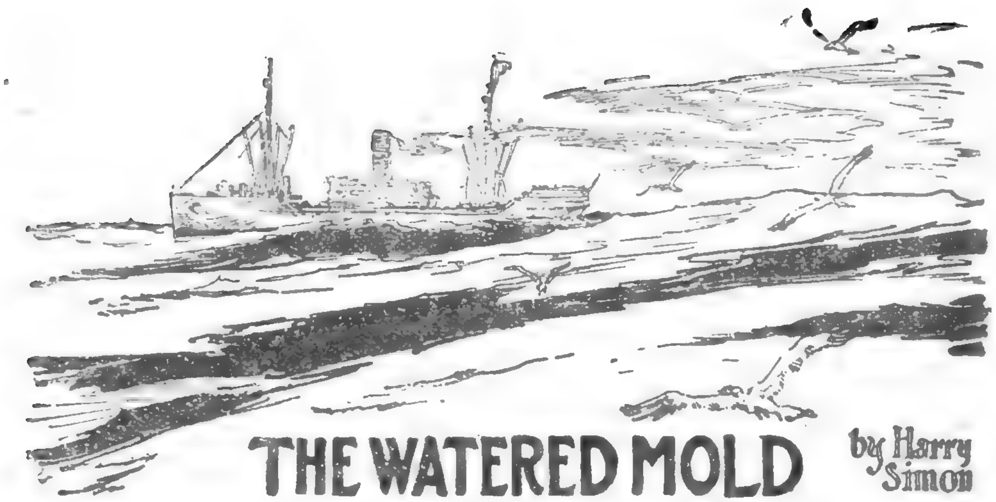
Since we are here, you and I, and traveling fellows, we will do well to laugh as we wander along, waiting to go out upon whatever voyage shall beckon us; knowing that voyaging will not be denied.

We are like those sailors who I saw a-many years past, strolling nonchalantly by dock-side streets—the sea of life ours. We face a stout man's calling. Thus we must somehow contrive not to flinch when on life's sea we meet disaster interwoven with the days of bright weather. If we can sing upon a sunshiny day, so also will we sing when hail is rattling on mast and spar. We are invincible; a valiant world having bidden to its fellowship; fellows with those voiceless and beautiful spirits that ever hover about us along the limitless waves of life's sea.

Perhaps you will go to sea. Perhaps you will not. If you have open eyes you will find a wonderful thing wherever your feet lead you. It may take time to open your eyes. See, though, that they do not fail to open. Wish for the worth-while thing, and the worth-while thing will, in time, arrive to you. It is only to those whose eyes are closed by the turmoil of this old world's merchandises, and the acquiring of wealths, that life becomes a drudgery, death a dread.

Keep your heart up; though it is, I know right well, a hard matter to endure, a desperate fight to laugh in the deep rolling waters.

Yet, sail on!



THE WATERED MOLD

by Harry Simon

THE tender, trailing a thin cloud of smoke from her lone stack, forged slowly through the water. She rode easily on the long Pacific swells. But to Garry Wright, molder second-class, down in the foundry, she seemed to be pitching excessively indeed. He was miserably conscious of every heave and roll of her, every dip and rise.

Listlessly he adjusted the core for the piston-ring stock. His chest felt cramped and constricted and his eyeballs ached dully. He was weary in body and depressed in mind. The others in the foundry, indifferent apparently to the motion of the ship, went efficiently about their work, ramming the last of the molds, putting the cores in place and clamping down the copes.

The sudden long blast from the klaxon, manipulated from the repair office by an electric button, came as a welcome relief to Wright. Instantly he straightened up from the mold and without another thought for the job at hand started for the makeshift wooden ladder which led to their living-quarters on the evaporator-deck thirty feet above.

Stooping directly in his path, tightening a clamp on a flask, was "Tex" Carter, a first-class molder both by rate and actual practise. Too late, Garry Wright became aware of his presence.

Taken off his balance, Tex Carter pitched across the mold. Instinctively his hands spread out to stay his fall and to avoid at the same time injuring the delicate green-sand core which hung suspended in the cope. His hands, fortunately, each encountered an opposite edge of the flask, and without damage to anything but his temper he whirled about.

"Might 'a' knowed it was you," he growled, seeing the open-mouthed, apprehensive Wright. "Always the speedy boy when it comes t' knockin' off, ain't yuh?"

"Aw, I didn't mean to bump into you," said Wright apologetically. "I—I didn't see you."

"Yuh didn't, huh! Well, yuh would 'a' if yuh hadn't been in such a doggone hurry t' quit workin'. Darn it anyway, why don't yuh snap out of it? Here we are gittin' all set t' take off our first big heat this afternoon and the second that blasted horn goes off yuh make fer the ladder! Man, it's about time yuh begun lookin' round and takin' a little interest in your work."

Wright looked pained at the insinuation.

"Aw, I do take an interest in my work," he objected. "But where's the sense in workin' over-time? We ain't gettin' paid for it. Besides, I'm finished with that piston-ring mold."

"Yeah, but what about that last one there, those valve seats. You just amble over there now and close 'er up. An' nex' time don't be in such a sweat to hit the ladder. Yuh come mighty close t' spoilin' a morning's work on me. Go on now, 'Spark-Plug—' " as Wright hesitated—"git a-movin', or, by ——, I'll take yuh by the slack o' the pants and run yuh over—one!"

Though reluctant to resume his work

Wright evidently thought it the better part of discretion to do so, and with dragging feet he moved to comply.

"Attaboy, Tex!" came a voice in approval. "You saved me the trouble of sending him back myself. All that guy needs is some one to keep after him all the time. It's about time he got wised up to himself and snapped."

"Yeah!" Tex Carter concurred heartily. "He's had plenty time. Been gettin' away with it too long, that's what's the matter with him. This goin' ashore in Panama most every afternoon, when the rest of the repair gang was gettin' only about one out o' four, ain't done him any good that I c'n see. Him gettin' all the special liberty he wanted and then growlin' 'bout a little extra work!"

Several minutes later and the preparations for running off the heat in the afternoon were practically completed. The trestles, or horses as they were more often called, were in place before the cupola. Across them rested the handles of the shank, the ladle in the center ready to receive the first outpour of flaming metal. The deck was covered with molds, some of which had been rammed over a week before. These were aligned in three rows forward of the two brass furnaces, the smaller molds farthest from the cupola. Every bit of the cramped deck space available had been utilized.

On the starboard side the salt-water and steam-lines and the crated accessories intended for the uncompleted evaporators above and the empty wooden flasks were partitioned off by sheets of asbestos; as were the combination sand-bin and molding-bench placed thwartship forward and the wooden bins of scrap metal on the port side. Sheets of asbestos also separated the risers, or vents, on two of the molds.

It needed but to fire the cupola, and the *Alaric*, newest of Uncle Sam's repair ships—a converted ninety-day boat—would run off her first big iron-heat.

"Well, I reckon we'll call it a morning," said Charlie Roble, molder first-class who was in charge of the foundry.

It was he who had expressed approval of Tex Carter's action in ordering Wright back to work.

"It'll be one-sharp this afternoon," he continued. "We want to get off to a good start. And you there, 'Speed,' don't let us have to search the ship for you today like we usually do!"

Wright muttered something unintelligible in reply and shuffled wearily up the ladder after the others. He felt tired and unaccountably weak. His mouth and throat were disagreeably dry. He was filled with a dull resentment for the few minutes extra he had been compelled to put in. With visible effort he climbed over the hatch-chains on to the deck.

From under the work-bench he dragged forth a bucket half-filled with the brackish allowance of water left over from early morning, and settled down on it in the corner by his locker. His head in his hands and his eyes fixed moodily, unseeingly on the steel deck, he sat there a prey to self-pity and dejection.

All told there were five men who worked regularly in the foundry. Besides Charlie Roble and Tex Carter, there was "Bridge" Thorne, a second-class molder and Fireman "Duke" Chesley. For the moment they were all too busily engaged in removing their morning's accumulation of dust and grime to think of aught else.

Thorne, small, wiry and energetic, the first to finish his hasty ablution, cast a reflective eye upon Wright.

"Ain't seasick, are ya?" he asked quizzically.

Wright, ever on the alert to detect mockery and derision in the speech of others, raised his head and regarded Thorne sourly.

"Naw! I'm all right."

"You'd better look alive then."

Thorne's lips parted in their ready smile, revealing the expansive gold-work beneath which had earned him the appellation of "Bridge."

"It's most near chow time." And he added not unkindly. "Better get crumbed up."

"Don't you worry about me!" retorted Wright surlily. "I'll get cleaned up in time enough."

Thorne's lips screwed up wryly at the rebuff, and when he spoke again his voice was slightly sarcastic in tone:

"Sure! Like ya did yesterday noon."

"Aw, lay off me! Who's bothering you, anyway? Why don't you attend to your own business and quit buttin' into what don't concern you?"

The angry blood welled up in Thorne's

countenance, and his eyes sparkled dangerously.

"That's enough outa you!" he snapped. "A fellow tries to tell ya something in a nice way and right away ya get up on your high horse. What you need is a good rubdown with canvas and sand and, by all that's holy, ya'd get it too if ya ate on my table and kept comin' to it that way!"

"Well, I ain't on your table."

Wright came back with a flash of spirit.

"Besides, if you want to know, it's none of your business whether I clean up or not."

"No; but I guess it's mine," interjected Duke Chesley, emerging from among the evaporators with a towel to his face. "I ain't gonna have anybody pawin' over my bread with dirty hands. It's fellers like you, who won't take a bit of time to crumb up that make a ship regulation. Won't be long before they'll be having us all get out of our dungarees into whites for every meal, all on account of a few lazy boots like you!"

"Aw, you butt out of this!"

Wright's lips pouted sullenly. "You're only a striker, anyway. I don't have to take nothin' from you."

"You don't, eh!" snarled Duke, his ordinarily-placid temper suddenly deserting him. "You sawed-off snipe! You just try sitting down nex' to me at table without crumbin' up first an' see how long you stay there! ——, if I've even seen you take a bath since we left Panama!"

Wright's teeth closed on his tremulous under-lip; his weak chin quivered.

"Aw, why don't you leave a feller alone?" he whimpered. "I was going to wash up. Everybody is always picking on me. Why don't you lemme alone once?"

Duke advanced threateningly upon him.

"I'll let you alone all right, you little half-portion! You hustle out of that bucket and stick your nose into it, or I'll darn soon do it for you!"

Wright flinched from him and shrank back against his locker, arm raised before face as if to ward off an impending blow. But his fears were quickly dissipated; for Charlie Roble, prompt to perceive the possible consequences of an injudicious action, laid a restraining hand upon the wrathful six-footer.

"Not that way, Duke," he cautioned. "Don't get yourself into trouble over him when you're so close to making a rating. He ain't worth it."

The big man shook his head, like a terrier shedding water after a ducking. And on his usually placid countenance dawned an apologetic grin.

"Gee, Charlie!" he averred. "If he ain't always gettin' my goat!"

"He's enough to get anybody's goat," declared Charlie Roble. "That's the trouble with shippin' in kids like him with ratings. Mostly all alike, careless, slovenly and undisciplined. It would be different if they were men, but most of them are just kids. It's a big mistake, not sending 'em through the boot-camp and makin' 'em work for their rates. We all had to work for ours. And it ain't fair to the men already in who are workin' hard to get ahead to have kids like that shipped in over them."

"Yeah," agreed Tex Carter. "It's enough to discourage any man."

Breathing heavily after his momentary alarm Wright glared belligerently at them, but they gave him no further heed. Angrily then he sloshed the water around in his bucket, stirring up the greasy film on the top.

He was wrathfully digging the soap from his smarting eyes a little later when chow was piped down and he was left alone in the foundry.

Blindly he groped for his locker. Finding it, he jerked out his towel. Dried, he returned it to the locker and slammed the door shut. With a few petulant hand-slaps he shook the loose sand from his dungarees.

His eyes from their cursory inspection of his person took in the bucket at his feet. Though it was strictly against regulations to throw anything through the portholes Wright, during the time the ship had been anchored off Balboa, had continually emptied his bucket and thrown refuse out of them. Instinctively his eyes sought the airports now. But they were closed—had been so ever since the tender put to sea from Panama three days before. The empty evaporators over on the starboard side suggested to his mind a convenient place for depositing the dirty water, and taking up his bucket he started toward them.

His movements were mechanical, for he was consumed with hate and resentment. He was incensed at the ill-treatment his shipmates accorded him. He was angered and nettled by their contempt and lack of consideration. Because he was younger than they, because he had been in the Navy only a short time and had enlisted with a rating they were always finding fault with him. Nothing he did was right. If it wasn't one thing it was another. One day Carter; the next day Thorne; they were always picking on him—the four of 'em!

"—— 'em, anyway!" he swore internally. "I'm as good or better a molder than any of 'em. I can put up a flask with the best of 'em. But just because they've been in longer and got it on me in weight and everything they think they can boss me. Jealous, the lot of 'em. I'd like to show 'em once, the rotten bullies!"

Half-way to the evaporators he was halted by a sudden evil thought. Leaning with one hand on a stanchion he gazed down contemplatively on the molds standing out in three orderly rows amidst the confused miscellany in the hold. His glance shifted to the water in the bucket which he still held in his other hand and a gleam, malevolent in its intensity, came into his eyes.

He took a tentative step back to the makeshift wooden ladder which rested on the cement deck below. Indecisively he hesitated a moment while his eyes darted apprehensively around the foundry and overhead to the water-tight door giving on the second deck, and from there to the open hatch above before coming down again to rest on another bucket on the deck, also partly-filled with water.

His jaw tightened resolutely then, and setting down his own bucket he poured some of the contents from the other into it. The bucket was more than three-fourths full when he took it up again.

His eyes made another hasty circuit of the foundry. Assured there were none to observe his actions, he moved to the ladder. Holding his bucket carefully so as not to splatter any drops, he made his way down backward.

On the deck below he hesitated once more, studying the molds, but for a moment only. Quickly he reached a decision. The flask containing the mold for a throttle-valve housing, wherein the delicate green-sand core hung suspended—the flask which Tex Carter had put up—was ideally situated for his nefarious plan. It was in the middle row, the second mold from the port side; close enough to the cupola for his purpose and yet so situated that several ladles of molten iron would be run off and poured into other molds before that particular one was reached.

A last furtive look overhead, then cautiously tilting the bucket over the mold he let the water trickle gently into the gate. Taking great care not to wet the sand on top, he raised the bottom of the bucket slowly higher and higher. Down the channel of the mold the water ran in a steady little stream.

Garry Wright gritted his teeth. Think they were better than he was, hey? He'd show them, the —— crabbers! Try to ride him, would they? And threaten him! Well, he'd fix 'em. Fix 'em good and proper! Give 'em something to think of for a long, long time to come. That was if any of 'em were able to think after he got through with 'em!

"I've stood all of their growlin' I'm going to," he told himself grimly.

The bucket empty, he went swiftly up the ladder, gloating inwardly. They could run off their big heat now, for all he cared. They could go right to it, and be —— to 'em!

On the surface of the mold was no trace of the water he had poured into it. Absorbed, seeped in the sand, the water—a powerful, potential force—lay literally in ambush. It needed but contact with the hot flaming metal from the cupola for this force to be released—to wreak its havoc in the foundry. The mold, in short, was loaded with destruction.

Along about five or six bells perhaps, the throttle-valve-housing casting would be poured. But Garry Wright had no intention of being in the vicinity when that came off. Just previous to the occurrence he would find some plausible excuse to take himself to another part of the ship.

For, he knew, contact of the burning white-hot metal with the moist, water-soaked sand would mean the quick, sudden generation of steam. Steam, instantaneous, galvanic and irresistable in its action. Uncontrollable steam. Steam which would rend the mold angrily, scattering to the four bulkheads of the foundry hot sand and molten metal, a veritable shower of flaming metal, of heavy liquid fire, which would scorch and blister, singe and sear; a burning shower—in duration brief, in effect devastating—coming all too suddenly and unexpectedly for the men to seek shelter from it. Steam which would wreck and maim!

Carter and Chesley pouring the casting and Roble directing and handling the skimmer would be in direct line to receive the full force of the explosion. They certainly would feel its effects. But neither would Thorne, tending the cupola at the spout, go unscathed. The mold into which the water had been poured had been chosen with a view to avoiding that contingency. No, none of them could by any unforeseen chance escape.

Garry Wright's eyes shone malignantly. So they'd boss him around, would they? Use him for a football and door-mat, and mock and taunt him, hey? Well, they'd get their's soon. Get it good! Burns and scars a-plenty, that would maybe blind one or two of 'em. Perhaps even kill!

"—— 'em all, anyway! It'll serve 'em right. They've been abusing me long enough. To —— with 'em all!"

THE mental depression and bodily languor which had all but left him was revived by the sight of food. The taste of pork brought on a sudden nausea. Gulping convulsively, his hand to his mouth, Garry Wright rose from the table. He made hastily for the ladder, staggering as he went, followed by a raucous outburst of mirth, pithily and cogently interspersed with advice.

"Feed it to the fishes!"

The voice of Duke Chesley was wafted up to him through the hatch.

In the clean, invigorating sea air above, he immediately began to feel better. His nausea quickly left him. But his virulence, if anything, was intensified. That the foundry-workers had been loudest in their jeers hadn't failed to impress him. They missed no opportunity to torment and harass him. They seemed, in fact, to delight in doing so.

Let them laugh while they could, he told himself bitterly; they'd pay for it. There was vindictive pleasure in the thought.

He made his way forward on the starboard side. Midships, secured outboard to two angle-iron stanchions which helped support the upper or boat deck, was a large life-raft, doughnut in shape. Across its center stretched a latticework of wood, to which was affixed a pair of paddles. Propping himself up on the rail Wright leaned against the raft.

He might have been more chary in trusting his weight to it, had he observed the insecure manner in which the raft was made fast to the stanchions. Where normally it was secured by four wooden toggles fixed transversely at each corner through the bight of the lanyard, there were now only two; one right by his head and the other below, diagonally across from it, around the stanchion aft. The raft gave mute evidence of the haste in getting ready for sea, coupled with its consequential and usually inevitable little oversights, which subtly characterized the tender in certain minute but nevertheless important respects.

The work of making the *Alaric* over into a Naval vessel had begun slowly about a year before after she had been towed to the Navy Yard in Brooklyn from Jamaica Bay, where she had lain ever since the Shipping Board had made its cut in tonnage. In this labor both the yard workmen and Navy men shared. It was a big job, this converting of a merchant vessel into a repair ship and destroyer tender, and a dirty one. For she was foul with rust and bilgewater. Decks and bulkheads were ripped out bodily and new ones installed. Boilers were rebricked and retubed. Engines and pumps were overhauled. The blinding blue flame of acetylene and electric burner was forever in evidence. The ship reverberated to the clatter of riveting-guns and chipping-hammers.

Fitting out the *Alaric* for the work of a tender took on a little later the additional task of decommissioning the *Rehtnap* when she came alongside at the termination of her Asiatic cruise. The old repair ship bulked small indeed beside the new *Alaric* with her over four-hundred-and-eighty-six-foot length, her beam of about fifty-five and her ten-thousand-ton displacement.

Day by day the *Rehtnap* rose visibly higher and higher in the water as her machine tools, stores and miscellaneous marine equipment disappeared into the capacious holds of the *Alaric*, without apparently making any encroachments upon that ship's water-line. Finally the *Rehtnap*, naught but an empty gray hull, bobbing up and down like a cork, her long and useful career as a Navy vessel at last ended, had been towed away to be auctioned off, perhaps to be later disposed of as junk.

And before the setting in of winter the *Alaric* cast off her lines and stood out to sea, ordered to San Diego. Garry Wright, enlisted in the Navy but three weeks before, came on with several others at Newport, where she stopped for a few hours to take on machinery and cargo.

Work went on apace. The ship's holds were a vast confusion. Stores had been piled up in them indiscriminately. The storerooms lacked partitions, shelves and bins. Bulkheads, frames and beams which were yet to be riveted creaked and strained against their bolts. Many bulkheads and half-decks were still to be put in. Machine tools which had been hastily secured for sea had to be permanently installed. Too, they badly needed overhauling, and there were many missing parts to be manufactured.

There was the laundry to be installed, the ventilation and evaporator systems, the blacksmiths' and coppersmiths' shops, the torpedo and electrical repair shops and the foundry. In truth, there was little rest the trip. Yet the work accomplished was but a drop in the bucket to what still remained to be done on the *Alaric* when she arrived in San Diego.

No sooner did she drop anchor there than a destroyer shoved alongside with a hole in her bow big enough to drive a team of horses through, where she had rammed into a coal barge in the fog the night previous. With eighteen other destroyers vociferously and incessantly clamoring for repairs and supplies, the *Alaric's* work as a tender really began.

Four months later, again heading for San Diego, after the termination of the spring maneuvers south, the work on the *Alaric* proper was little nearer completion than it had been on first dropping anchor there.

Even as Garry Wright sat perched on the rail half-facing the water, his shoulder against the life-raft and one hand unconsciously toying with the wooden toggle by his head, a gang of ship-fitters, hurrying to beat time, commenced the temporary rigging of an addition to the cupola stack, which at present reached only to the level of the hatch-coaming. Down in the ship-fitter shop they had bent and riveted the sheet metal into shape. The addition had been made to extend above the captain's cabin and the bridge. With efficiency and expediency born of a long and varied experience, they started to set up the stack.

Wright, with an interested eye for the occasional fish which darted up from the sea and went skimming over the glassy, undulating surface at a tangent from the ship's course, to sink as suddenly again amidst a widening circle of ripples, watched the ship-fitters at their work.

Suddenly one of them raised his head, and a look comical in its dismay spread over his countenance, unnaturally white beneath the tan. Abruptly he lunged for the rail.

Instantly work ceased and an hilarious chorus of whoops and cries broke forth, in which Thorne and Duke Chesley, coming on the scene just then, joined in lustily. That Wright was not unaware of their presence his scowl amply testified.

The unlucky ship-fitter, no whit abashed at finding himself the temporary butt of his shipmates' raillery, laughed ruefully, wiped his chin, and loudly and fervently expressed himself of certain heart-felt hopes. After which, all grinning broadly, work was resumed.

Looking around for further sport, Duke's eye lighted upon Wright.

"Well, well!" he proclaimed, winking at Thorne. "If it ain't our old friend, Speed himself! Sitting high an' dry too. Say, how does it feel with your face washed?"

Wright's scowl deepened, and his fingers tightened around the wooden toggle.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he retorted sneeringly.

Thorne chortled appreciatively.

"That's one on you, Duke," he said, and turning to Wright with a grin, "Come on, bury the grouch! With everything calm and peaceful your way, nothin' comin' up at all, y' ought ta be feelin' 'specially good."

Whatever reply Wright might have made to this was lost in Duke Chesley's ensuing bellow:

"Look out there, dumb-bell! You'll have that raft overboard in a second!"

But his cry came too late. For the damage was already done, the warning being emitted practically at its inception. Wright's fingers, playing nervously with the wooden toggle, had with a quick spasmodic jerk withdrawn it from the bight. The raft, released from its upper support, took on all the propensities of a pendulum. It swung down in a wide arc; the toggle was whipped from Wright's suddenly palsied fingers.

The momentum of the raft's swing together with the added weight thus thrown abruptly upon the frayed lanyard around the stanchion aft was too much for it. Rotted by oil and paint, the lanyard parted and the raft dropped with a splash into the sea. Only Duke Chesley's quick grab saved Wright from following it backward over the rail.

"You've done it, now," said Duke accusingly, placing him on his feet. "We'll lose an hour, picking up that raft."

"Yes; and with the skipper so anxious to get back to his wife and kid in Dego," put in Thorne, "it'll be your hide if they get ya up for this. Come on! Let's get away from here."

Pushing the flustered Wright before them they started aft, only to run squarely into the boatswain who was hurrying forward.

"Here! Just a minute!" he demanded. "How did that raft get overboard?"

"Fell, sir, I guess," said Thorne brightly.

The huge, red-faced boatswain awarded him with a suspicious gaze, and then glanced searchingly at the others.

"You men must have been tinkering with it."

"I—I happened to lean against it," faltered Wright.

"It wasn't his fault," spoke up Duke Chesley quickly, meeting the boatswain's belligerent eye. "It never would've fallen, sir, if it had been properly secured in the first place."

"We'll go into that later."

The boatswain dismissed them with a short wave of his hand.

Turning, he addressed a lean figure in undershirt and white trousers who was sprawled against the bulkhead in the shade of the upper deck:

"Stand by, cox'n, to lower the whale-boat!"

The coxswain blinked and raised up slowly on his feet.

"We painted one o' the whale-boats this morning," he announced in lugubrious tones. "Won't be dry 'fore night. 'Sides which y' can't lower her. The davit that give way ain't been fixed yet. Repair gang's workin' on the other whale-boat. Got her side stove in."

"The deuce! How about the twenty-four-foot motor-sailer? Who's cox'n of that, now?

The coxswain yawned, oblivous seemingly of the boatswain's impatience, and gazed off sadly toward the distant horizon.

"Don't know if she's got a cox'n," he drawled. "Reckon yer don't want him anyway, sir. 'Cause if I ain't mistaken her engine's down in the machine shop bein' overhauled and half her bottom's ripped out."

"We'll have to lower a thirty-three footer then," the boatswain decided, plainly exasperated. "That is," he added with sarcasm, "if we can find one among 'em that is serviceable or seaworthy."

There were several snickers from the men of the repair force who had collected around and were standing by listening, and a laugh was wrung from the lips of Chief Carpenter's Mate McFallon.

The boatswain glanced quickly at him, his color rapidly rising. Irascibly he said—

"What strikes you as being so distinctly comical?"

Chips McFallon smiled.

"You're out o' luck for a thirty-three footer, Mr. Andrews. There's men workin' on two of 'em. There's sideboards, strakes and beading being replaced on both, and one o' their engines is all apart besides. The twenty-four footer that's havin' 'er engine overhauled is cradled in the third one, which leaves that out. For that matter, the only boat available for lowerin' is one o' the forty-footers. I know the captain's gig and the two squadron's gigs ain't in any fit condition. Hulls are undergoing extensive repairs and engines are all bein' overhauled."

"That's a fine note," declared the boatswain. "I didn't realize things were that bad. Where would we be, I'd like to know, if we had to abandon ship?"

"We better not figure on doin' any abandoning this trip. You know, sir, them boats got some pretty rough handling down in Panama, and we got all our carpenters' mates and strikers spread out on 'em now. At that we'll have to do some tall hustlin' to get 'em into shape before we hit Dego. What with all the destroyer work to do, we sure won't find any time to work on 'em after we get there. Yes, sir, guess if you lower any boat at all it'll have to be a forty-footer, that one on the starboard side, for'ard o' the cap'n's cabin and just abaft the king-boom."

"Well, it'll have to be that then. Come along, cox'n! You can give a hand."

And the boatswain moved forward.

"Mus' think I'm the only cox'n on this doggone pig iron," murmured that individual dolefully, and drawing one last breath from his cigaret butt before flipping it over the side he wearily followed.

The ship already had slowed down, and was now tacking about. Far astern the raft bobbed up serenely on the crest of a swell, only to disappear again the next moment in the trough of the sea. High overhead the sun blazed down hotly. Heat waves shimmered up lazily from the steel deck.

"Let's see what's comin' off up for'ard," suggested Duke Chesley.

"Suits me," said Thorne. "But we better keep out of the bos'n's sight. Come on, Wright!"

On the forecastle, interested spectators, they watched preparations for lowering the forty-footer. Quickly the king-boom was rigged out. The strongbacks and boat-gripes securing the motor-sailer to the deck were as expeditiously removed. In hardly any time at all a strain was being taken on the boat slings, and the forty-footer rose slowly from her cradle.

The aftermast-guy not permitting of a straight swing-out, to direct the boat around it necessitated some fine maneuvering of the guide-lines. But repetition had reduced this to a matter of routine, and in the minimum of time required for the process the boat was hanging out over the side above the sea, its bottom even with the rail.

The propeller by now had ceased turning, and the *Alaric* wallowed idly in the current. Slowly the motor-sailer was lowered, her crew within dexterously keeping her from scraping against the ship's side the while they grinned up cheerfully at those lined along the rail.

"Feelin' kind of perky, ain't they?" remarked Duke.

"Don't think as I'd feel so darn happy in their places," the browned and grizzled boatswain's mate beside him commented morosely, squinting up anxiously at the vibrating king-boom.

"Why not, 'Blackie?' Ain't nothin' wrong, is there?"

"Ain't they!"

The boatswain's mate's eyes darted swiftly to the mast.

"Say, Duke, listen! Those toppin'-lift lines are jus' about rotted away, all dried out an' 'teri'ated with age. Should 'a' been given the deep-six long ago. Ain't fit to trust the weight of a canoe to 'em, let alone a three-ton motor-sailer."

"Go 'way, Blackie! You're seein' things!" chipped in Thorne. "Ain't gotten over ya last Panama jag. Why, those lines look as new as new! There! The boat's hit the water! Show's there's nothin' wrong. You're talkin' through your beer."

"Ain't neither. I'm sober'n what you are, Bridge; an' I tell you it's a crime t' use those lines. May look new, but they ain't. They're rotten. I told the bos'n when they wus rigged out day after we lef' Panama that they weren't fit t' use, but he thinks he knows better. Said—" contemptuously—"I wuz too finicky. But wait 'til somethin' happens," he continued portentously; "jus' wait. Those lines are only holdin' t'gether through habit. They wus dug outen the holds o' the *Rehtnap* in N'York, an' lord knows how long they'd been stowed there. But I sure know they ain't safe t' use now. Anybody what knows anything a-tall 'bout a line c'n soon see for theirselves if they'll trouble to inspect that end there on deck."

With his eyes the grizzled boatswain's mate directed the attention of the group about him toward the foot of the mast. Bringing them abruptly back again he caught the last fading traces of sly grins on several faces, besides intercepting a hasty wink from Thorne not intended for his sight.

"Go ahead, laugh!" said the boatswain's mate bitterly. "Laugh! You birds know everything!"

Roughly he elbowed his way through them and moved off, followed by their derisive chuckles.

A few minutes later and the motor-sailer, the cynosure of all eyes on deck, had reached the raft and begun the short tow back to the ship. The coxwain, however, evidently decided there were ways of making better time, for soon after the boat crew were seen to be dragging the raft aboard.

Alongside again, the boat-slings were quickly ringed on the hook of the block. And to a harsh accompaniment of straining and creaking from the rigging the boat rose slowly from the water. Up, up she came—evenly—until abreast of the rail, and there hung poised. But only for a moment.

Though somewhat prone to exaggeration, Blackie, the grizzled old boatswain's mate, in declaring the topping-lift lines rotten had spoken not without a deep knowledge of his subject, a knowledge he had begun the acquiring of back in the days when there were still many vessels in the Navy under sail. The topping-lift lines were certainly in a bad way, and like the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back it may have been that the added weight of the doughnut raft, insignificant of itself, proved too much for them. The king-boom quivered and trembled visibly; and above the whistle of escaping steam, above the screech of the winch there was heard in that moment a sudden ominous sound. With a snap the topping-lift line parted.

Simultaneously, it seemed, the voice of Blackie was raised in a warning bellow:

"Stand from under!"

Acting as of one accord the men on the forecastle broke and scattered.

The faces of the boat's crew blanched; their eyes widened. The king-boom appeared to hesitate for an instant; then, with a swoop, down it came, bringing up with a crash upon the chains and bending toward it the tops of the eyed stanchions on either side, like asters attracted to the sun. The men in her frozen to their places, the boat rushed down to meet the sea.

The boom, inanimate but exerting in its fall the tremendous weight of the greater part of its length as a lever and using the highest part of the winch—the gear-casing—as a fulcrum, with a hiss drew upward from its socket the goose-neck pin. Slamming on the brakes, the winchman leaped to the battened-down hatch in a bound, only just in time to avoid being crushed to the coaming by the lower end of the mighty boom as it rolled down from the now-split gear-casing.

A *smack*, and the boat had met the water. The coxswain in the stern, standing on his toes, was brought up crouching, white-faced and breathless but unhurt. With like results, the engineman was flattened to the deck and the two seamen by the gunwale midships were doubled up suddenly over the raft. But the bowman, not so fortunate was pitched clear off his feet. His head coming in violent contact with a strake, he rolled to the bottom of the boat and, one arm curled awkwardly beneath him, lay still.

Above, on the forecastle, his body partly in the shadow of the winch, another white-clad figure also lay strangely quiet and inert; while close by, Garry Wright, hardly knowing what had struck him sprawled uncertainly to hands and knees and began slowly to rise up on his feet. The battered seaman, lying so still now on the deck, had but an instant before been standing there eagerly conscious, holding back the slack of the line with which he had taken several turns around the drum of the winch.

The line, as the king-boom started to fall, began to twist and burn through his fingers. There was no way of checking it, and it was useless to hold on. The instinct of self-preservation urged the seaman forward, as far away as possible from the falling boom, and letting go the line altogether he turned and made for the bow. But the acting upon instinct, in his case, failed of preservation. For the line, running out beneath him, cast a turn around a foot, and his legs were jerked abruptly from under him. Wright, who was hastening forward just behind him, was thrown half-way across the deck by the terrific impact. The seaman, clawing wildly, was drawn swiftly, irresistibly backward, smashed against the drum and thrown in a heap, maimed and senseless.

The momentary silence which reigned on the forecastle following the crash of the king-boom quickly gave way to a nervous activity. A crowd quickly collected around Garry Wright, and he found himself being helped to his feet. Holding him, one on each side, were Thorne and Duke Chesley. There was compassion in their manner and very evident concern. Wright's limbs shook under him; he felt dazed.

"Here," said Thorne. "Put your arm on my shoulder. Are ya hurt bad?"

"Can you navigate O. K.?" asked Duke Chesley, reaching an arm easily around his waist. "Better let me carry you down to the sick bay, old-timer."

"No! No!" exclaimed Wright, resisting the attempt to pick him up. "I'm all right."

There was a break in his voice.

"Just—just a bit shaken-up, that's all."

"Ya sure? Better let the doctor look ya over."

"Yeah! No tellin' how bad you might be hurt inside."

With a supreme effort Wright mastered his trembling. He had been badly shaken-up, but he soon convinced them that outside of that he had suffered no injuries.

"Whew!" exclaimed Thorne, expelling a deep breath. "Ya certainly give us a scare."

"Thought you were a gonner sure," said Duke Chesley, drawing an arm across his damp forehead.

"Yer lucky, kid," said Blackie, the boatswain's mate, who had edged over to the group a moment before.

The expression on his countenance was bitter and his eyes glittered darkly.

"The bow-hook's busted an arm, an' they's no tellin' how bad hurt poor Craney is. His foot's smashed to a pulp and his head's bashed in; may be crippled for life, if nothin' worse, an' all on account o' some rotted line. Said it wuzn't safe too, but nobody'd listen. They'll find now they ain't no economy in bein' careless an' in too —— much of a hurry. Better slow an' careful when it comes to riggin' lines, same as pickin' your way through a fog."

"Say, Blackie," put in Duke Chesley contritely, reaching out a conciliatory hand. "Sorry we give you the razz."

"Needn't apologize, Duke," he said, not without bitterness. "I'm used to bein' considered a old has-been Here comes the skipper down off the bridge. I'll bet he's boilin', too. It'll be a couple hours afore we git this mess cleared up an' underway again. Better clear the fo'c's'le, ev'rybody!"

Wright, in his slight befuddlement on regaining his feet, hadn't failed to observe the anxiety of both Thorne and Duke Chesley, and, seeing their relief upon being assured of his well-being, a new understanding began slowly to dawn upon him. They had been quick to rally to his support when the raft had gone over the side and they had been the first to reach him when he had been thrown. They had, in turn, been exercised and concerned. In the light of this there could be little doubt of how he stood with them.

He had been doing them an injustice in his thoughts. They couldn't, he acknowledged to himself, be such bad fellows after all, Duke and Thorne. And chances were Charlie Roble and Tex Carter would have been just as quick to come to his defense, been just as apprehensive and solicitous. As for their growling, he had to admit now, that he had given 'em plenty of grounds for that. Been too forward and presuming entirely, and then shirked on them when they had failed to be impressed by his cleverness. Acted like a spoiled kid. And he had been foolish to resent their good-natured raillery. They meant nothing by it. In fact, it might be taken as an acceptance of him as one of themselves. For, now that he thought of it, he couldn't remember them getting hilarious with any but those of their own bunch, those with whom they were on the friendliest terms. Yes, he had greatly misjudged them.

"About time we were getting down to the foundry, anyway," said Thorne. "Let's go!"

The words brought Garry Wright up with a start. In the excitement and rush of events, thought of the mold which he had watered had been driven completely from his mind. It came back to him now with all the effects of a blow, and he turned suddenly white.

Over by the winch the unconscious seaman was being gently lifted on to a stretcher. The leg of his trousers had been ripped up and a hasty tourniquet applied. Garry Wright caught a sickening sight of torn flesh and protruding bone. A convulsive shiver ran down his spine, his throat contracted in a gulp and it struck him in that instant that he was to blame for the unhappy state the seaman was in.

If he hadn't fooled with the toggle the raft wouldn't have gone overboard and there would have been no necessity for using the king-boom. Through his carelessness he had let two men in for serious injury, if not worse. And now, down in the foundry, the mold waited, the mold which he had deliberately watered. God! how did he ever come to think of letting anybody in for that. The harm resultant from the explosion would be greater than any king-boom accident. It was an insane trick! Good God! what had he done?

"Here! Look out!" cried Duke Chesley warningly. "Hold on to yourself. Say, man, you're as white as a ghost! You sure you're not hurt?"

They had him again between them, one on each side.

With an effort Wright collected himself; the color returned to his face in a flood.

"Just a passing weakness," he explained hesitatingly. "I'm all right now."

And he started toward the hatch for the foundry.

Thorne and Duke Chesley glanced uncertainly at each other.

"Well," doubtfully from Thorne, to Wright's retreating back; "if you say so. Guess Charlie an' Tex are down there now. Might as well join 'em before they start getting impatient."

TWO-BELLS struck as they started down the ladder giving on the living-deck of the foundry.

The ship-fitters had already completed the temporary installation of the cupola-stack addition. Neither had Charlie Roble nor Tex Carter been idle. The charging door of the cupola stack was even with the living-deck, on the starboard side of which the empty evaporators were installed. This deck had now been literally converted into a stage or charging platform. A striker from the machine shop had been assigned to assist them for the afternoon, and with his aid the scrap and pig iron and coke had been weighed and spread out in heaps on the deck.

"Now, you don't want to be putting anything into the cueb'lo until you get the sign from me," Charlie Roble was concluding his instructions to the striker, a tall, slim boy, whose eyes glowed with interest; while Tex Carter was measuring out the last heap of coke. "Many a heat's been spoiled by improper charging. If you keep your eye on me and feed the cueb'lo according to directions, we shouldn't have any trouble."

"You leave it to me, Charlie. I'll keep my eyes trimmed."

They all looked up at the rattling of the chain-guards and the sound of crunching footsteps on the ladder.

Thorne correctly interpreted the question in their eyes, and in a few short sentences made clear what had been taking place on the top-side. They had to be assured then that Wright was in no way hurt before they would return to the subject of their work.

"The little extra rolling we're doing while standing by until the motor sailer can be hoisted aboard," mused Charlie Roble, "shouldn't make any difference in the castings."

"May even set better," was Tex Carter's opinion, "with the vibration of the ship's engines cut out."

"Likely be underway again, anyway, before we start pouring," said Thorne.

"Well, let's get the fire going so we can start. I expect Mr. Woolsey'll be down in a little while. Said he'd drop around."

The striker peering after them through the gloom, they filed down the wooden ladder to the cement deck below.

The bottom doors of the cupola had been propped up the day previous, and a sand bottom of the requisite thickness and slope rammed, leading down to the spout. Upon this bottom a sufficient quantity of oil-soaked waste and fine wood shavings had been placed properly to ignite the coke above, of which half the amount roughly calculated to form the bed had already been added.

Charlie Roble proceeded now to light the fire while the others went about their various last-minute preparations incidental to tapping the cupola and pouring the castings.

"All right," yelled up Charlie Roble to the striker on the charging-platform when the coke had burnt through and settled to the bottom.

The remainder of the coke required to extend the bed sufficiently above the tuyères was charged into the cupola, and upon another sign from Roble the striker heaved the first charge of scrap and pig iron into the stack, following it with alternate charges of coke and iron until the cupola was filled almost to the charging door. Thorne, in the meantime, had inserted the core into the tap hole, lightly daubing it with clay on the outer end to prevent the iron leaking past.

Charlie Roble turned on the wind and, cupping his hands, yelled up further instructions:

"You can start chargin' her again in about five minutes. Keep the door closed when you're not chargin'."

"Aye, aye, admiral!" the striker above sang out cheerfully.

The heat in the foundry was intense. Tex Carter and Duke had both stripped to the skin above the waist. Their bodies gleamed with sweat, as did the faces of the others. They all grinned cheerfully at each other. That is, all except Wright. The mold which he had watered preyed too much upon his mind to permit of his strained, set features relaxing in a grin.

He recognized it now for the despicable and cowardly act that it was, and deeply he regretted the rash impulse which had moved him toward it. It was up to him to undo it, he decided inwardly. He tried to nerve himself up to the point of confessing, but he just couldn't do it.

But neither could he stand idly by. He was in the grip of remorse. Each moment brought closer and closer to the four the grim fate which lurked treacherous and cruel within the mold. Vividly, agonizingly, Wright, envisioned it—the sudden crack of the explosion, the bursting flames, the spreading sparks and enveloping fire, the anguished screams and curses and the smell of scorched flesh!

Hot as the foundry was, he broke into a cold sweat. He must, he absolutely must tell them! He gritted his teeth and set his jaws resolutely; he swallowed hard once and found his voice.

"Fellows, I——" he started uncertainly, then stopped.

They were paying him no attention. Some one was coming down the ladder. Wright looked up, to see Mr. Woolsey descending. His heart sank and his resolution fell from him like a cloak.

Mr. Woolsey was the chief machinist in charge of the machine shops and the foundry. He was a gruff, thick-set man with overhanging brows. Silent himself, he had a silencing effect upon others. He had sunken black eyes; and the searching quality of his gaze, together with this habitual silence of his, was usually productive in Wright of an unaccountable feeling of guilt, of a sense of negligence. On the whole, Mr. Woolsey was well-liked by his men, and they turned out good work for him.

"We'll be ready to tap 'er in a few minutes, Mr. Woolsey," Charlie Roble informed him, as he swung down from the ladder and moved over to the molding bench. "Nothing to do for a while but wait."

"Don't mind me," said Mr. Woolsey. "You're in charge. I'm leaving everything to you. This foundry stuff is new to me. Just come down to watch."

Wright edged miserably away along the bench. The starch had all gone out of him, leaving him weak and limp. Tormented by his thoughts he stood there, gazing blankly before him.

Watching through the peep-holes in the tuyères, Charlie Roble decided that a sufficient quantity of metal was already melted and tapped the cupola. Wright started violently as a shower of sparks burst from the tap hole. The sparks were followed in a moment by the molten metal which ran down the spout in a glowing stream. The ladle filled rapidly.

Another ladle was quickly got in readiness by Thorne and shoved under the spout as Tex Carter and Duke Chesley lifted the first away. Wright came shuffling forward with the skimmer.

"Plug 'er when she thins out," directed Roble, handing the tapping iron to Thorne.

His lips twitching, Wright skimmed back the impurities floating on top of the heavier melted iron, as the first casting was poured. At a word from Roble he automatically touched off the vent at the top with the hot skimmer, igniting the escaping gas in a thin bluish flame. A second ladle of the viscid devil-soup was poured, after which there was a slight respite.

Wright staggered back to the bench. Desperately he wanted to tell them what he had done, about the mold he had watered. But he couldn't do it. He was in a worse state of indecision than before. He was afraid, terribly afraid. Admit that he had laid a trap to—to murder them! No; he couldn't do it. He looked up, to see Mr. Woolsey regarding him searchingly, quizzically, and with a great mental effort he smoothed his tortured features. But he couldn't drive away the acute headache which had taken possession of him, nor overcome the physical illness which seemed to pervade his whole body.

When the ladle was again filled and he started toward it he stumbled, and would have fallen had not Mr. Woolsey put out an arm to restrain him.

"Better go up on deck for a blow if you're not feeling well," advised Charlie Roble kindly. "I can handle the skimmer and kind of hold back on the ladle at the same time."

"No; that's all right," stammered Wright. "I—I'll manage."

His face, in the light given off by the glowing metal, was ghastly.

"Go on up," spoke up Mr. Woolsey gruffly. "And tell Bowers in the machine shop I want him down here."

On the top-side something kept drawing Garry Wright back to the foundry. He had made no effort to find Bowers. He couldn't let any one else be drawn into the peril the others were in, as had Mr. Woolsey. And he must tell them before it was too late. He simply must.

He braced himself for the ordeal.

But in the foundry he was again overcome by irresolution. He couldn't make the grade; his good intentions oozed out of him. He managed to get out clearly enough though:

"I—I couldn't find Bowers. I'm feeling all right now, anyway. Only needed a breath of air."

Mr. Woolsey glanced at him sharply from under his brows but said nothing.

The pouring continued unabated, with short intervals between ladles. The first mold in the second row was finally reached and the casting poured. The mold next to it was the throttle-valve housing.

Wright made another attempt to get up enough courage and firmness to speak, but to no avail. He couldn't do it. He glanced wildly up at the open hatch and the bit of blue sky visible high above and stifled an impulse to bolt from the foundry. The ladle filling under the spout of the coupola drew him toward it like a magnet. In less than a minute it would be filled and the molten metal poured into the watered mold. He gazed hypnotically into the glowing mass.

Tex Carter came over and reached down to take the handle of the shank. Wright, gazing in fascinated terror at the hell-broth accumulating in the ladle, brushed his hand aside.

"I—I'll help pour this one," he spilled the words out hastily. "Lemme pour. You handle the skimmer."

The ladle-bowl was fitted tightly in the circle of what was familiarly known as a single-end shank; there were two handles extending from the crosspiece on one end, affording a leverage for tilting the ladle, the other end being single. Duke Chesley had already picked up the double-handled end, swinging it off the trestle. Grasping the other end firmly, Wright moved backward with it.

He could not have told what mad impulse urged him to the action. He was in a torment of conflicting emotions and breathed heavily. He moved in a daze—it hardly seemed of his own volition—taking short steps. He stumbled as he backed into the aisle, mechanically righting himself, and an idea full-grown leaped into his mind. He did not stop to consider its possible consequences to himself nor to reflect upon it. He wondered why he had not thought of it before—it was so simple. And no one need ever know!

He stumbled again as he reached the throttle-valve-housing mold. But there was no recovering himself this time. Instead, he fell awkwardly against the mold, artfully bringing all his weight down on the shank. The sudden pull caught Duke Chesley with one foot off the ground, and he was jerked violently forward against the crosspiece between the two handles. With a thrill Garry Wright felt his end of the shank sink deep into the mold as it gave in on its hollowed-out center under the pressure.

Liquid fire splashed over the edge of the tilted ladle, and the thrill was almost instantly followed by a burning searing pain which ran down his shoulder and lapped angrily at his heel. A horrible scream was wrung from him.

Springing forward, Mr. Woolsey and Roble dragged him back from the glowing, sputtering mass which was spreading sluggishly on the deck.

"God!" exclaimed Duke Chesley, pulling back on his heels.

Hastily, he set his end of the shank across the neighboring mold and leaped back from the encroaching flames at his feet.

Wright gritted his teeth. He was wracked with physical pain, but he was aware of an overwhelming relief. A terrible load had been lifted from his mind. The mold with the delicate green-sand core, the mold he had watered was irretrievably ruined. Hot metal hissed and spluttered where it had spilled on its surface, mingling with the loose sand pried up by the shank end. As far as spoiling the mold was concerned, things couldn't have worked out to Wright's better satisfaction.

"I—I'm sorry I ruined the mold," he stammered between set teeth, as he was propped against the sand bin beneath the molding bench.

"—— the mold!" cursed Charlie Roble, holding him with one arm. "It's all my fault. I shouldn't have let you work. I didn't realize how sick you were. God! How are we going to get you up the ladder?"

But that difficulty was solved for him.

The strain Wright had been under all day proved too much for him. He was vaguely conscious of a confusion of voices above him, as he collapsed weakly in Roble's arms. Total oblivion descended upon him.

IN THE sick bay, his shoulder and foot swathed in heavy bandages, Garry Wright reclined on a bunk, staring up at the overhead. The ship was again underway. He could feel the vibration of the engines and was dimly aware of a slight rolling under him. He did not mind the pain of his burns. For the first time in many a day his mind was at peace.

"Serves me right, these burns," he told himself. "And I hope to choke if I don't prove up a regular guy and—and shipmate!"

THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND

A Four-Part Story
Part II

by Arthur O. Friel

Author of "Thicker Than Water," "The Thirty Gang," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

BACK to back, three white men—McKay, Knowlton, and Ryan—fought doggedly against foes half seen. They had poor targets—a glimmer of steel; an arrow streaking from a clump of broad-leaved plantain; a dodging movement among a tangle of lianas.

It was an uneven fight and, when fierce yells announced the arrival of another party of savages, it seemed that the white men were doomed. And then the firing in the jungle diminished. From near at hand came sudden splashes, earthy thumps, grunts and snarls of grappling antagonists.

Running feet padded and the jungle erupted a figure as grisly as a buccaneer of the Spanish Main. Indians, all armed with spear and rifle, smeared with the blood of foemen, hard-jawed and slit-eyed, followed close behind him.

"It is José Martinez!" cried Knowlton.

"It is true," yelled José, his teeth flashing. "Welcome back my companions of days gone by. What a killing you have made here!"

"Yeah! And now ye come hornin' in and busting up the game!" snorted Tim.

"Then you shall join mine," retorted José. "But come, I must move."

A little later, after much bloody fighting, the four white men sat in the big hut of the conquered Jivero community, scowling at the roof-pole from which hung a score of human heads.

"We're looking for Rand," McKay said presently.

"Rand!" exclaimed José. "Your friend and mine. I have not forgotten. It was he who first brought you three into this part of the world. He disappeared while traveling in Brazil and you found him alive, but crazed by a bullet, among the cannibals of the Rio Javary, in Brazil. And you cured his craziness by hiting him over the head with a gun."

Knowlton nodded.

"He's disappeared again—we're afraid he's gone back to the jungle."

One of José's men brought in one of the women captives. She was not a Jivero woman but a prisoner brought from the country of the Huambizas away to the southeast. She spoke Spanish perfectly and—was very beautiful. Around her neck a gold cross was suspended. Her name, she said, was Nuné.

She refused to answer José's searching questions but the next morning, proving that she was not ill-disposed toward them, Nuné saved their lives by warning them not to eat the food prepared by the captured Jivero women—it had been poisoned.

By noon the party started back for José's stronghold. Five suns slid across the great green abyss and vanished behind the colossal wall of the Andes. Five nights whelmed the forest in blackness through which moved only the creatures spawned to prey in gloom.

On the sixth day they came to the wonderful domain José had made his own. A stronghold which was practically impregnable; a fertile, sunlit plateau peopled by healthy, intelligent people who called José "king."

"On the level now," said Tim Ryan after José had explained his system of government and his ambition to make his White Ones so powerful that they could exterminate the murderous head-hunters of the jungle; "On the level now: Don't this king business make ye feel sort of tied down?"

"I ache for the voices and laughter of my own people," José said sorrowfully. "I am a white man. I am not an Indian. Yet among the Indians I must live; in the jungles I must die." He laughed harshly. "King? *Sí*, I have made myself a king and built for myself a prison."

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CHAPTER VIII

THE INQUISITION

OUT of the northwest, deep and slow, sounded the boom of a drum. José halted. His visitors sat up, watching him and listening. The sound ceased. Then, somewhere close at hand, thundered a single drum-stroke in reply.

With a motion to the others, José strode off the piazza and toward the rear. They arose and followed. While they walked, the distant drum began thumping again; and now it spoke in irregular beats, with pauses. It still was sending its message when the white men reached the home station of the jungle telegraph.

A small open-sided hut formed the station. Within it, waist-high, hung the *tunday*—a section of hollow log with several notches, suspended by fiber cord and held firm by another cord anchored in the ground. Beside the drum stood a symmetrical young Indian holding a mallet encased in tapir-hide and listening intently to the incoming report.

As the northern drum became silent, he looked steadily at José. The latter spoke briefly. Still wordless, the operator swung his mallet in an unhurried succession of blows, striking with no apparent effort, but evoking thunderous tones. The last half-dozen notes were beaten in a rapid tattoo, which, the North Americans surmised, denoted a query.

Back came an answer. José frowned. For a minute he considered. Then he gave curt directions, heard them sent, and listened while one note thumped back in response. The operator laid his mallet on the drum, and his master turned away.

"This is strange," he pondered. "An Indian from the northwest has been stopped while trying to reach me. He carried a written message for me. He is being held at the place where he was caught, while one of my men runs here with the paper.

"That Indian must have been sent by the *padres* at Canelos. Nobody but the priests could make him come into this country. But those priests have no love for me, and I cannot understand why they should send me any word."

The others exchanged glances.

"Maybe it's for us," Knowlton suggested. "They knew we were looking for you when we were there, and maybe they've changed their opinion of us and—Say! Here's another possibility—maybe Dave has turned up!"

McKay's face, and Tim's too, brightened. The Spaniard looked skeptical.

"Might be," McKay said. "The Canelos outfit doesn't know we're looking for him, but the people up in the mountains do. They might have gotten track of him and sent a message. The priests would relay it, perhaps."

"Perhaps," conceded José; but his tone indicated disbelief.

"What's the trouble between you and the clergy, José?" asked Knowlton.

"There is no trouble, except that we do not agree. I have no enmity for them. But they do not understand my ideas. They believe in making a land peaceful through the cross, and in spite of all their failures they still cannot see that this region is too savage to be conquered in that way. So, because I build my nation by war—and because I allow no priest to come into my land and soften my men—they regard me as a man of blood, a son of the devil, and an enemy of the church. The first two of those things I may be, but not the third. Perhaps the time will come when they will realize that I was wiser than they, and that the heathen Martinez, slayer of head-hunters, was a power for good. But I care nothing for what they may say. The only priest whose talk I wish to hear is the one we brought with us."

They were walking again toward the royal house, passing others on the way. At one of these, a number of warriors seemed to be engaged in cleaning guns or leisurely making arrows. At another, women drowsed in hammocks or passed in and out. Apparently no Jivero women were permitted to ascend this rock.

"Ye mean Noony," nodded Tim, looking at the women. "What ye done with the li'l rascal? And what ye goin' to do with her later on?"

"She is resting in that house of the women. That is the house of my wives and children, and she is the first stranger who has ever been allowed to enter it. I intend soon to question her again."

He paused, glanced at the sun, and considered.

"But no. I think that first I shall take her for a walk—and you also, if you will come."

"Sure. Anything you say," yawned Knowlton.

"*Bueno.* Huarma!"

At his call, a tall young woman arose from a hammock on the shady porch of the women's house and stood looking inquiringly at him. In monotone, he spoke half a dozen Indian words. She turned and walked within. José resumed his way.

"Nuné will come to us presently," he said. "By the time the sun sets I think she will be in the mood to talk. We shall see."

As they passed onward, Tim stared back at the house.

"Twenty kids in there, and never a bawl!" he marveled. "How d'ye keep 'em quiet, Hozy?"

"I do not," chuckled the father. "But their mothers do. They have the Indian gift of training children to silence—indeed, the child of the jungle seems born to silence. Yet they are not so dumb in the morning. Now they take their afternoon sleep."

Without pausing at the house, he passed on to the guard-hut at the top of the cliff path. There the four waited, the Americans quickly surveying the interior and then turning their attention to the surroundings.

They noticed that the two sentries now on duty were not the same men who had watched them arrive, and now they recalled seeing the other pair resting at the house of the warriors behind them. They observed that a couple of carbines stood at the door for use if the long spears should prove insufficient, and that a small *tunday* and mallet hung ready to summon reserves. Then, looking below, they saw that not only the upper section of the ledge but much of the clearing was visible from this point.

"I am a most careful ruler, yes?" grinned José. "Not even a mosquito is allowed to pass and bite the sacred hide of the king."

"Yeah," assented Tim. "Too bad ye're so scairt o' gittin' hurt, ye poor fish. But we know how it is. Ye've got the women and kids to look out for."

"That is it," nodded the king. "I am not here at all times, and they must be protected. These guards never leave this rock. Ah, here is Nuné."

The others glanced around and forgot to turn back. McKay, eyes twinkling, advised:

"Steady, Tim! Take a grip on your heart."

"Hm! Our lady has changed again," commented Knowlton. "First a priestess, then a nymph, and now——"

"Oh, boy! Ain't she the baby vamp, though!"

Nuné had indeed changed. The alterations were simple, yet striking. Her plain, travel-stained robe had given way to one of the brilliantly feathered gowns of the wives of José. Her hair, which had been caught up in rough-and-ready fashion during the march, now formed an ebony frame for her ivory face. Both gown and hair accentuated the fairness of her skin; and her poise, the tilt of her head, the light in her brown eyes, held a challenge—born not of defiance or coquetry, but of the knowledge that she was very good to look upon.

"Ah! It works," muttered José.

"What works?" puzzled Knowlton.

"An idea I had. You shall see. Come."

DOWN the cliff-path he went, and out along the way by which they had come in. Presently they reached the stockade, where the gate now was shut. A couple of spearmen, at his approach, drew a bar and swung the barrier open. The five passed inside and looked about.

Within were a number of huts, most of which now were empty. In those nearest the gate were gathered the recently arrived Jivero women and children, resting after their march. They looked silently at the visitors, their faces expressionless until their eyes rested on Nuné. Then those eyes narrowed, and into them crept a snaky glint.

Nuné returned their unpleasant gaze with a steady, impersonal regard; but it was obvious that she recognized the menace under those lowering lids. José chuckled softly.

"The mind of a woman is queer, yes?" he said. "Behold these, unmoved by whatever fate I—a man—may give them, but stung by the sight of their Huambiza prisoner dressed like a queen."

Then, in Spanish—

"Nuné, would you like to live here?"

Her quick backward step answered more eloquently than words.

"No?" he teased. "It is a very comfortable place. But let us now look farther."

As he walked out he chuckled again. The gate swung shut behind them with a sullen bump, the bar slid creaking into its post-hole, and the spearmen resumed their vigil. The five returned to the main path, and soon turned down a byway.

A short distance in, they came to a space cleared of undergrowth but shadowed by the widespread crests of lofty trees. There stood a cool house, log-walled and palm-thatched, where a young woman held a baby while she watched two small boys shoot little arrows at a tree. On the approach of the party, the boys whirled and leveled their miniature weapons at the invaders; then lowered them and stood half-smiling, half-serious, as their king passed on.

"My little fighting men," jested José. "As quick as cats. And already they hit what they shoot at. They will make hard warriors."

A little farther on, they came into a small but fertile plantation. There toiled several Jivero women, watched by a Jivero boy holding a club. The boy was hardly ten years old, but his face was grim as that of a grown man.

"See," said José, speaking in Spanish for the benefit of Nuné. "Thus we use the Jiveros and grow our food. These women are allotted to this house behind us. The boy is overseer. One of those women is his mother, another his sister, but they gain no favors because of that. He is a Jivero man-child, and he rules them by Jivero law. He will never become a shrinker of heads—we White Ones see to that—but he and others like him are good slave-masters. If the women disobey, he must punish, or he will be put to work with them. He knows how to punish."

Covertly he watched Nuné while he talked. On her face he spied repulsion, and over his bearded lips flickered a grin.

"Now let us go," he went on. "This, my friends, is one of many such places, in this valley. They all are much alike, and, having seen one, you have seen all. Now we shall return to our rock and speak of another matter."

As they retraced their steps, the Americans glanced curiously at their quondam partner, endeavoring to fathom his purpose in leading the girl on this tour of inspection; for it was quite obvious to them, if not to her, that the exhibition of the servitude of the Jiveros was no mere whim. The donation of her new dress, too, had undoubtedly been made as the result of his commands, since his women would be quite unlikely to volunteer such adornment to one whom they could not fail to regard as a possible rival. These moves were deliberate preliminaries to something. But to what?

The ruler of the White Ones vouchsafed no information, and they asked no questions, waiting for the little drama to play itself. Up to the top they returned, and into the king's house they walked. There José seated himself at his big mahogany table, signing to the others to take places along the board. His own chair was as massive as the table, tall-backed, with a great jaguar-hide thrown carelessly across its top—a fitting seat for jungle royalty. The table now was blank and bare; the shadowy, silent room solemn as a court.

For several minutes the Spaniard sat motionless, his eyes dwelling on Nuné, his expression austere as that of a judge about to pronounce sentence. When he spoke, his voice was stern.

"Nuné, it now is time to speak whatever you know of the land of the Huambizas."

The girl steadily met his gaze. After a moment she answered—

"Nuné does not yet hear the command of Piatzo to speak."

"*Bien.* Then Nuné must remain here until she hears the command."

"You have promised," she said, "that Nuné could return to her people."

"True. But who are your people? The Huambizas?"

"The Huambizas."

"And you are a servant of Piatzo?"

"It is so."

"Bah!" He struck the table with a hand. "Both of those things cannot be true. The Huambizas are Jiveros. They are the most cruel and fierce of all the Jiveros. They do not obey Piatzo. When the men of the Huambizas do not serve Piatzo, no woman of theirs can serve him. If you are a Huambiza, you cannot serve Piatzo. If you are a servant of Piatzo you are not a Huambiza. So you do not speak truth. To one who does not speak truth I do not keep a promise unless I choose."

She sat dumb.

"You are very fair of skin," he went on, "and I know that some of the Huambizas are much more light than any other Jiveros. They have in them the blood of Spanish women captured three hundred years ago at the destruction of Sevilla de Oro, and of Spanish children who were caught in other raids since then at Barranca and Borja and who grew up as men and women of the

Huambizas. I know too, that you were brought as a prisoner to the place where I found you, and that you came from the Huambiza country, because I saw at that place the freshly-cured heads of three Huambiza men killed when you were caught. So I believe you to be Huambiza. But your cross and your talk of Piatzo—they mean nothing unless proved. Your story may be only a clever lie to gain the protection of the cross, and your cross may be the plunder from the body of some real priest beheaded by your Huambiza mate!"

At that she started up, horror on her face.

"No!" she denied. "It is——"

Then she stopped short.

"It is—what? You go no further. *Bien.* I understand. You refuse to talk, not because Piatzo tells you to be silent, but because you would protect the Huambizas from me. Piatzo does not bid any one to protect murderers from vengeance! You are Huambiza—Jivero—and in my kingdom there is but one place for women of the Jiveros. You have just seen that place. A real servant of Piatzo might remain on this rock, with all honor, or go freely away. But I allow no Jivero to stay here. A Jivero must work, down below, among other Jiveros."

He stopped and shot a warning glance at Tim, whose florid face was turning redder and whose blue eyes were beginning to glitter at this merciless denunciation and threat. The impressionable Irishman was taking this "third degree" as seriously as was Nuné, and now he was rapidly warming into a fighting wrath. McKay and Knowlton, following the look, gripped his shoulders and scowled at him. Tim, after a glare at both, swallowed something and remained silent.

Nuné stood as if petrified, conflicting emotions succeeding one another on her dazed face. José, watching her, spoke as harshly as before, giving her no hint of hope. But his words were directed to the Americans in their own tongue:

"Tim, learn something about handling women from a man who rules nine. There are times when you must 'treat 'em rough,' as you would say. This girl's weak spot is her pride—a true Spanish pride—and I am treating it roughly. First I pricked it by letting her find herself inferior in appearance to my wives. Then I flattered it by putting new clothing in her way, and the woman triumphed over the priestess, as you saw. And now, when her pride is most keen, I strike it brutally with a threat to degrade her into a fellow-slave with those snake-women whom she hates as they hate her. Behold now the result."

Even as he talked, the girl's head drooped. Then she regained her calmness and looked at her judge as steadily as before; but when she spoke, it was with a touch of humility never hitherto shown:

"It is true that Piatzo does not protect those who kill. It is true that my people do not serve him. It may be that Nuné has been sent to you by the Good Father, but she was blind to his will. Nuné will speak what she knows."

"It is well," José responded grimly. "Speak all the truth, and all that you can remember from the earliest time. Then shall I judge."

CHAPTER IX

A GIRL OF THE HEAD-HUNTERS

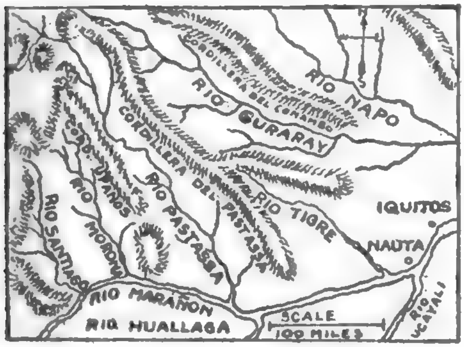
"NUNÉ is a girl of the Rio Upano," began the girl, speaking in her usual quiet tone. "The Upano comes from the great mountains, and on it is the city of Macas. A long way below Macas the rough water ends, and the river then is called Morona. It is a river of the Huambizas. In all its length there is no town of white men except Macas.

"Nuné was a little girl of the Huambizas who lived on a small stream called Kwana. The Huambizas of the Kwana had their house at a place two days west from the Upano. There Nuné lived and grew. She saw the men go away and come back with new heads and new women and children. Sometimes the new ones were very dark and came from a long distance away. Sometimes they were almost as light as Nuné. Nuné was more white than any of the other girls or boys.

"There was a wizard on the Kwana. Nuné was afraid of him, and so was every one else. He had a great snake that told him many things. It was a hungry snake. Sometimes a baby vanished. The wizard always said a demon had snatched the baby because its mother had thought bad luck upon the tribe. So the mother would be punished. A spear would be stuck through her stomach and she would die in great pain.

But Nuné noticed that when a baby was gone the snake always slept a long time.

"Nuné spoke about this. She said the babies had gone into the belly of the snake. The wizard was very angry. He said she must be killed for speaking so. He said she was no Huambiza, but a white cat brought home from a raid, and no good ever came from sparing such an evil creature. Now she must be killed, or the demon in her would cause all the tribe to be caught by their enemies. The *curaca** did not like this, because Nuné now would soon be a woman, and a son of the *curaca* wanted her. But he was afraid of the wizard, too. They talked and fought with words. The wizard made the *curaca* believe Nuné must die. She must be tied to a post, and the snake would come there and crush her.



"So Nuné was tied to the post. First there was much beating of the drums, and the men took the heads of their enemies from the house and marched around her swinging the heads by the hair. This went on all day, and at night little fires were built all around Nuné and her post to keep her demon from escaping. The fires were not near enough to burn her, but they gave light, and men watched. All the next day there was drumming and marching. All this time Nuné stood at the post, with no food.

"That night the wizard watched alone. When all slept he told Nuné he would take her to a secret place where none would find her. There she would live and there he would come to her at times, and she would be his woman. The people would think a demon had eaten her in the night. But Nuné would rather be killed than be the woman of the wizard. Even the snake was not as bad as he. She told him so. Then he was more angry than before.

"In the morning the wizard brought the snake. He blew on a pipe of cane with holes, and the snake followed him. He walked around and around the post, and the snake slid around and around after. Every one was there to see Nuné die.

"Then a great terrible voice spoke. From the forest came a tall thin man with awful eyes shining like the eyes of a tiger. He wore a long black robe and carried a gold cross. He came through the crowd and stood beside Nuné. He roared in a strange tongue and shook his cross at the snake and the wizard. The wizard stood still and the snake stopped. Then the wizard howled that this was a devil priest of the white men and the warriors must kill him. But the men did not move. They were afraid of the awful eyes and the thunder voice of the man in black.

"Then the wizard made strange noises to the snake. The snake came to kill Nuné and the man of the cross. The man reached under his robe and drew a machete. The machete flashed and the snake had no head.

"The snake rolled and twisted. It struck the wizard and threw him down. It caught him around the neck. His tongue ran out and his face turned black. When the snake was still the wizard was still. He was killed by his dead snake.

"The people were much afraid. They made this white man their new wizard. But he had no magic. He would not make the rain come as a good sign for the hunting of heads. When he had learned the tongue of the Huambizas he told them they must stop killing. They must worship Piatzo. If they did not they would all be burned forever. But the Huambizas did not believe this. They killed more men and they did not worship Piatzo, and they were not burned. So they said this man was no wizard, but a man with a demon. But they were afraid to kill him. His eyes were so terrible that no man dared to strike at him. And he said that if they should kill him Piatzo would kill them. They were not much afraid of Piatzo, but for a long time they did not harm this man.

"Because he had taken Nuné from the wizard and the snake, Nuné now was his woman by Huambiza law. He did not want a woman. But Nuné was not quite a woman yet, and he let her be his servant and live with him in the house of the dead wizard. He was kind. He taught Nuné his language, which she learned very fast. He told her to call him *Padre*, and said he had come to her because he heard the drums calling him.

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*Chief.

"He asked if Nuné remembered living anywhere else. Nuné said no. But she remembered what the wizard said, that she was not a Huambiza but a white cat brought there from some other place. She told this to *Padre*. He said she must be a Spanish child, stolen perhaps from Macas. He was of Macas, and knew of several babies who had been lost from there with their mothers. But Nuné could not remember anything before being on the stream Kwana.

"So Nuné became a woman in the house of *Padre*. He was a good man and taught her much. He was kind to all the people, except when he was angered and shouted of the wrath of Piatzo. He could cast out demons with his cross and his staring eyes. He made men well who were sick. But he could not drive out his own demon or make his own mind well. Often in the night he would cry out that his brothers called him mad, and ask the Great Father why he must suffer so. And he would cry:

" 'Mad, you fools? It is you who are mad, who stay comfortably in Macas while the heathen await the Word. They will not come to you. The Word must go to them!'

"And then he would groan—

" 'O *Dios*, how long?'

"Then he became sick. As he lay sick he taught Nuné how to drive out demons, and how to put water on babies to save them from burning forever, and other things. When he grew more strong he made men bring him a little gold, and with the gold he made a cross. He gave that cross to Nuné, and told her that by it she could carry on the work of Piatzo when he was gone. He felt that he soon would be there no more. That is how Nuné got the cross which she now has.

"Now the son of the *curaca* wanted Nuné as before. But Nuné would not have him. He had done nothing to save her from the wizard and the snake. And *Padre* told him in his thunder voice to leave Nuné in peace. But one day Nuné heard a great cry, and *Padre* was dead. The son of the *curaca* had shot an arrow into his back. Then he came leaping and cut off the head of *Padre*. And he took Nuné by the hair, shouting that she now was his woman.

"Before he could drag Nuné to his house there was a terrible yelling and men sprang from the forest all about. Arrows and spears flew and there was banging of guns. In a little time all the Huambiza men were dead and their heads cut off. Nuné and the other women and children were driven toward the river Upano. Some women who rebelled were killed and their heads taken. The head of *Padre* too was carried away. The men were Jiveros from beyond the Upano, to the south. They now had won many Huambiza heads and were proud and glad.

"They soon stopped because night came. In the night Nuné crept to the stick where the heads were, and took away the head of *Padre*. She carried it back to her sleeping-place. She dug a hole with her fingers and buried the head, so that the Jiveros could not make it small with the others. She had to move as quietly as a snake, because all about were fires and men awake. But in the morning the head of *Padre* was safe. The men were very angry, but they could not find the head. . Nuné had covered the place so carefully that no sign was left.

"Then they went on. At the Upano they stayed long enough to make the heads small. For two days and two nights they worked, with much dancing and shouting. While they did this Nuné talked to other women who could swim. She said they might escape if they would try hard. They were afraid. They said they would be killed. But Nuné gave them faith. While it was very dark they made a run for the water. They jumped in, and the swift water carried them away. They swam far in the night. When day came they went up a stream at the right. They saw no more of the Jiveros.

"Before long they found another Huambiza house. The other women took new men and lived there. But Nuné wanted no man. She would go with the cross and the word of Piatzo, as *Padre* had told her to do. When the men said she must stay and become a mother, she told them she would put on them the curse of Piatzo and they would be killed by their enemies.

"The other women who had been with her warned the men to take care. They said Nuné was not like other women but was under the protection of Piatzo, and Piatzo would kill any one who hurt her. They told how Piatzo sent *Padre* to save Nuné and how the wizard was then killed by his own snake. They told how Piatzo threw the Jiveros on the Huambizas as soon as the son of the *curaca* struck *Padre*. They said even the head of *Padre* had been snatched by Piatzo in darkness from the head-sticks. The men thought about this and grew afraid. Their *curaca* and their wizard talked. They agreed that Nuné must not be harmed.

"This word went about among other Huambizas. When Nuné went to new Huambiza houses no man laid hand on her. She cast out devils and made men well and saved babies from fire as *Padre* had said. She did not try to make the men stop taking heads, because she knew they would not stop. Yet Piatzo gave his protection to any Huambiza house where Nuné stayed. No enemy struck at such a house when she was in it.

"So Nuné went up and down the Huambiza land. But she tired of seeing the little heads and thought of Macas, where she might have been born. So she went to Macas. There she found other men like *Padre*. They too were called *Padre* and wore black robes. She told them about the *Padre* she knew, and they asked many questions. They remembered him, and once one of them tapped his head, looking queerly at the others, and the others nodded. But they said he had died for the glory of *Dios* and would have great reward. And they said Nuné was truly a servant of Piatzo, and that through her the *infieles* might at last come to respect the cross. They thought she should go back and carry on her work.

"But Nuné liked Macas and would stay there. But she could find no one who knew her. And men laughed and called her Huambiza and white Indian and other things, and only the *Padres* saved her from being a slave. So Nuné did not like Macas longer. She went back to her own land."

FOR the first time the girl hesitated, as if debating what to say next. Her eyes strayed to the intent trio of North Americans, seeming to study their faces anew. The Spaniard's lids narrowed shrewdly. The room was silent until she resumed her narrative, bringing it to a rapid conclusion:

"One day Nuné went from a Huambiza house into the forest to find an herb. While she was there, a great noise came from the place she had left. It was a fight. Soon came some Jiveros hurrying away with three Huambiza heads. They had struck at the place but failed to capture it. Many of them were hurt. They caught Nuné and took her away. Nuné had to go. She could not escape. They were very ugly and watched her closely.

"They traveled fast until they reached a great house near the Pastasa. Then they quarreled about Nuné. Each wanted her. The *curaca* said he would decide the matter. While they talked, another fight began in the forest. Men rushed out. The fight became very bad. Then it was over. Piatzo had sent new men to save Nuné. You are those men."

Thus simply she closed her recital. The men stirred, glancing at one another and then looking again at her with frank admiration. José spoke first, still holding her with his piercing gaze.

"You have spoken well. I see now that you are truly a priestess of Piatzo. Yet you have not told all."

Again that momentary hesitation was noticeable. Then, defensively, she countered—

"What more is there to tell?"

"Perhaps little. Perhaps much. In the years since Nuné became a woman she has been the woman of no man?"

"It is so." Her head lifted a trifle.

"Has Nuné never met the man she desired?"

"That is a matter which must remain in the heart of Nuné!" she retorted, with a flash of spirit.

"Ah. Perhaps you are right. Let us put it in another way. Has Nuné desired any man of the Huambizas or of the Jiveros?"

"No."

"Has Nuné found in the land of the Huambizas or of the Jiveros any man who is not one of them? A white man, perhaps?"

This time the hesitation was even more pronounced. Her eyes darted to black-bearded, gray-eyed McKay.

"Answer!" snapped José.

"It is so," she admitted.

"Ah! *Sí!* Now tell us of him."

Mutiny smoldered in the gaze she gave him.

"You would find an enemy?" she demanded.

"No. I would learn of a friend."

Another pause, while eye probed eye. Then her face cleared.

"In a great house of the Huambizas between the river Morona and the river Paute," she slowly said, "Nuné knows a man who is a white Indian like herself. But he is not a Huambiza. He speaks the tongue of the white man and wears a black beard—like that of this man."

She motioned toward McKay.

"Yet he speaks also Indian tongues. He talks the language of the Quichua Indians of the north, and of some nation to the south, and now he has learned the words of my own people. He says he is an Indian from far down the Marañon, which there is called Amazon, and that he traveled many days to become one of the Huambizas. He has not been many moons in this country, but he now fights among the leaders on the raids. He owns a gun and is a strong fighter. But he kills only men, and will not shrink a head or carry away a woman. It is not the custom of his nation to do this."

José, who at first had leaned forward expectantly, now sat back and frowned as if perplexed.

"Is he a white man or an Indian?"

"He is a white man and an Indian, as Nuné is a white woman and an Indian."

"*Caramba!* I do not understand this. He comes from the Amazon? Hm! Does he wear white-man clothing?"

"No. He wears only the crotch-cloth, like all Huambizas. He can make and shoot the bow and arrow, and call the monkeys, and do many other things no white man does. Yet he can do many white-man things also. And his gun is one that speaks fast, with yellow bullets."

José scowled all the more. Sudden light flashed into his face.

"That is it!" he breathed. "Quick, girl! Of what nation on the Amazon is this man? What is the color of his eyes? How is he called?"

"He is of a nation called Mayoruna, on a river named Yavarí. He has——"

"Mayoruna!" ejaculated McKay. "Yavarí! Those are the Mayoruna cannibals, and the Rio Javary, where we first found Dave!"

"*Sí!* But be quiet a moment longer, friend! Nuné, go on! His eyes?"

"His eyes are green. In his hair is a white mark over the left ear. He is called Rana."

José nodded, his mouth hardening. The Americans sat dazed. Slowly they turned and looked at one another, and back at José, and then blankly at nothing.

"Cripes!" muttered Tim. "It's him! Rana is Dave Rand! And he's gone clean to the bad! Him, with all his brains and money, turned into a roarin' head-huntin' Injun! My ——!"

CHAPTER X

A VOICE FROM THE WEST

"I HAVE feared something of this sort," said the King of the White Ones.

"Do you mean to say you've suspected this right along?" demanded Knowlton. "And kept your mouth shut about it to us? Do you call that square?"

"It is more square than to insinuate such a thing about Señor Dave when I did not know it to be true," was the rather cool reply. "And I can not say that I suspected it. Rather, I felt it—as a man vaguely feels that some evil thing is near him when he can neither see nor hear it. I did not wish to suspect it—I put the thought from me and told myself it could not be so."

He stared in a troubled way through the open doorway, beyond which the long shadows of approaching sunset stretched across the little acropolis.

"This thing is more serious to me than to you," he went on. "And this is the way of it:

"A little time ago the word came to me that among the Huambizas was a man who was increasing their power and making them more fierce in their raiding. I could learn very little about this man, for the talk was vague and came from some newly captured Jivero women, who knew only the rumor which had drifted into the Jivero region. But the report was that this man was a very light Huambiza with a black beard—the lighter Huambizas often have such beards—who fought with a gun and was very deadly. It was said also that the Huambizas now were raiding in larger parties and going farther, and this was said to be because of this man's planning. That was all I could learn.

"Now the great secret of my strength in this land is the fact that my White Ones are organized and that the shrinkers of heads are not. As I have said, the Jivero nation is made up of four great tribes—the

Jiveros themselves, the Huambizas, the Antipas and the Aguarunas—who have the same language and customs; but instead of standing together they kill one another. Inside the tribes there is much the same lack of unity, although there is not so much killing.

"Each settlement is generally alone and a long way from the next, and its *curaca* has no power over the next place, and sometimes very little control of his own men. There are times when a great number of men will come together for a certain raid, but that is not often; and as soon as it is over they scatter to their own places. All this is much in my favor. I can strike a certain place, destroy it, move on, and destroy others in turn. So I can make every blow deadly and lose few of my own men. I can not afford to lose men; my nation is not yet large enough to stand much loss.

"My greatest danger, then, is that my enemies will come together and make up too strong a force to be conquered. That would mean the end of my people. So, when I hear of the Huambizas increasing the size of their war-parties and the power of their attacks, it is a matter of great concern to me. You all have been soldiers. You realize what I must do."

"Smash the enemy before he can get set," nodded McKay. "But see here——"

"Wait. Let me say it all and have done with it. Now I have not yet struck at the Huambizas, because they are farther away than the Jiveros, and I naturally attack the enemy nearest to me. Also, they help me without meaning to do so, by killing Jiveros at the west and south while I fight from the east and north. The Jiveros are between us. In the natural course it would be years—perhaps ten, perhaps more—before I should be ready to attack the Huambizas. But if some man is building the Huambizas into a solid fighting force I can not wait. I must cross the Jivero country, go into the Huambiza land, find this new peril, and smash it before it is organized strongly enough to strike at me!"

"How would you find it?" objected Knowlton. "Like hunting a needle in a haystack."

"Not so, *teniente*," José differed, with a grim smile. "I shall find a guide."

McKay glanced significantly at Nuné.

"Maybe she—" he suggested.

"No. She would not guide us. She is no fool, and she would know our war-party meant no good. Can you not see that she is in love with Señor Dave? I knew she was protecting some one at the last of her tale, and, since she had avoided mentioning the leader of whom I had heard, it must be he. Yet I am sore at heart to find that this Huambiza leader is Dave.

"I did not know he had come back until you told me so at the Jivero house. Then the thought of the Huambiza leader flashed into my head. But I told myself that it could not be he, and when the thought kept coming back I would not believe it. But now——"

He shrugged.

The three looked gloomily at nothing. Finally Knowlton said, as if the words were dragged out of him:

"His mind's gone back on him again. You remember, fellows—when we first found Dave he was——"

He left the sentence unfinished.

McKay arose and began pacing up and down, stiff-backed, soldierly, silent, his brow wrinkled in unpleasant thought. Tim stared dolefully at the table; then crashed a fist down on it.

"Crazy like a fox!" he gruffly disputed. "Lookit here! Dave's so slick you guys don't git what he's doin'. He was an Injun five years, yeah. Crazy, sure, he was, but when he got his brains runnin' right he didn't forgit his Injun stuff. We seen that, when he come up the Tigre with us afterward. All that ol' jungle stuff o' his was right on tap when he wanted to use it. Now he's usin' it! Makes these dummies think he's a white Injun and plays the game with 'em, so's to git the dope he come down here for. The boy's clever, I'll tell the world!"

"So clever that he lost all his equipment and his Quichua packers," dryly retorted McKay.

"Um! Begorry, ye're right. I forgot about that." Tim relapsed into silence.

Nuné moved. McKay, striding back and forth, was approaching her again. She stepped before him.

"Man with the black beard," she said, "does this white chief with the face of a hawk speak true? Do you seek in the land of my people a friend? Is Rana that friend, or is he your enemy?"

McKay met her questing gaze with a look searching, yet kindly.

"Rana is the man we seek," he answered. "He has been our friend, and we have sought him because we thought him to be lost. Now the great white chief feels that Rana has become his enemy. Yet we are still the friends of Rana; and we would reach him and have talk with him. Is Rana the friend of Nuné?"

"It is so," she replied, with direct simplicity. "Rana is a great fighting man and terrible to his enemies. Yet he is kind to Nuné, and the heart of Nuné turns to him."

"And why did not Rana protect Nuné from capture by the Jiveros?"

"He did not know. Nuné was alone in the forest."

"So. Now, Nuné has spoken of returning to her own people. She would go back to Rana?"

"It is so."

"And will Nuné lead us to Rana, that we may talk with him?"

She eyed him doubtfully.

"It is a long journey," she temporized. "And you are not friends to the men of the forest. They would not let you pass through to the place where Rana can be found."

"Then they must die. We must reach Rana."

"If you reach Rana," she challenged, "what comes after? Why would you talk with Rana?"

"Rana is not a Huambiza. He must return to his own people."

"His people are the Mayorunas of the Yavarí. He has said so. You are not men of the jungle. What have you to do with him and his people?"

"Rana must return to his own people!" repeated McKay.

The girl's eyes flashed.

"Then Nuné will not lead you to him! What Rana shall do is for Rana alone to decide. He came to us because he wished. He stays with us because he will. He is a man and knows his mind. You are not his friends! You would catch him and carry him away. Nuné will live and die a slave among Jiveros before she will lead you to kill her people and catch Rana!"

With that she turned from him and defiantly faced José, who was cynically watching the colloquy.

"And that's that!" commented Knowlton, with a faint smile. "Might have known it."

"Yeah. And the kid's dead right," grunted Tim. "'Tain't none of our funeral, at that. Dave come here on his own. He never asked us to come buttin' in. Seems to be takin' good care of himself, too; too danged good to suit Hozy, anyways. And if I was him and this li'l lady was mine, anybody that tried to yank me out o' here before I got ready to go would find himself up against a man-sized job, whether he was a friend o' mine or not. Looks like we'd better haul in our horns and beat it."

McKay and Knowlton glowered at him. Yet they could not deny that he was speaking the blunt truth. In the last analysis, the doings of David Rand were the business only of David Rand—at least, until they should become a menace to others. It was José, whose little kingdom already seemed to be menaced by those activities, who disagreed.

"Unfortunately I can not pull in my horns," he reminded them. "I have set myself to do here a piece of work, and I cannot allow the Huambizas to grow strong enough to wreck it. Before long I must act. And, whether Señor Dave likes it or not, comrades, if he can not be made to see reason he must be caught and carried away as the girl says. Otherwise he will be killed."

"Who by? You?" demanded Tim.

The Spaniard's face hardened again.

"If necessary—by me! It is much more likely that he will be killed by the savages. They are treacherous as snakes. Let him become hated by any one of them, and in the night——"

He flicked a finger across his throat.

"And if they spare him long, I can not. Any man who joins the enemies of my people becomes my own enemy, and must be treated as one. And a white man who joins hunters of heads—*caramba*, he is no more a white man! Before Señor Dave, *amigos*, are only two ends: capture or death."

STUDYING his grim jaw and inexorable eyes, the North Americans knew this son of the relentless Conquistadores would fulfil his threat to the letter. Like his indomitable forefathers, he would crush all obstacles to the achievement of his task. He would swerve for none. Nor, in all fairness, could he. Not merely his personal ambition, but the fate of his growing nation, was at stake. He was attempting a far greater work than had his ancestors: not to loot and destroy a primitive civilization, but to create such a civilization in a stronghold of the most abysmal savagery of the world. His sword could know no friend.

Yet, as he turned again to Nuné, his tone was kindly.

"Nuné, you have spoken well," he said. "You are a brave girl. You shall not be a slave among Jiveros, nor among any others. You shall remain on this rock, in the house of the women, with all honor. For a time you must stay here. Do not try to go away, for it can not be done. But I promise you once more that in time you shall return to your own people if you will. Until that time, you shall be more safe among us than you would be among the Huambizas. Now go."

A sudden glow swept her face; but she made no answer. Toward the doorway, now growing shadowy in the swiftly gathering dusk, she turned. Then Tim halted her.

"Noonay!" he called, rising as he spoke. Then, to the others: "Grrrumph! Gittin' dark. She might step on a snake or somethin'. I'll jest trail along to see she gits there safe. Come on, girlie. Grab a holt o' the big man's arm. That's right. *Vamos, señorita—soy un buen hombre*—I'm a reg'lar feller——"

Aggressively he marched out, the amazed Nuné clinging to the arm on which he had masterfully put her hand—startled, but by no means alarmed, or even displeased. In fact, something very much like a girlish giggle sounded as they passed through the portal. And, behind them, the glum-faced men broke suddenly into a roar of mirth.

"By ——!" cackled José. "This girl of the head-hunters might not be able to pass unescorted to the house of my wives, no? She might step on a worm or— Ha! ha! ha! *Caramba*, it is time something happened to make us laugh, friends. Our faces are as long as crocodiles."

"It's no use, Tim," called Knowlton. "These jungle girls don't know what a kiss means."

"Zat so? Well, they might learn," floated back Tim's retort. "Don't let 'em bother ye, Noony. They're a gang o' rough-necks. Now, me, I'm different—Aw rats, I forgot ye dunno English. *Mira*, savvy *un beso*——"

The voices grew indistinct.

"*Un beso*, eh?" echoed McKay. "Naughty, naughty! He's asking for a kiss already. And she a priestess!"

"Well, God loves the Irish, so why shouldn't an amateur priestess? And maybe he'll convert her. If he should teach her something about kisses, she might change her mind about returning to the Huambizas."

"——, and that is not such a joke," grinned José. "Her blood is Spanish, beyond a doubt; and the girls of my race are likely to be swift to love when a man rouses them. The man who is far away may be quickly forgotten if the one who is near is a—ah——"

"Fast worker," supplied Knowlton. "And Tim's all of that. Dave might lose out after all. Hm! Come to think of it—I wonder if she's the reason why Dave's turned Huambiza! What do you think, Rod?"

McKay shook his head.

"Doubt it. He's hard-boiled. Could have taken his pick from a dozen society girls up home if he'd felt like it. Peaches, too."

"That doesn't prove anything. More than one fellow has passed up society dolls and fallen for a native girl."

"True. But she herself says he has only been kind to her. He hasn't fallen for her. It's the other way around."

"M-m, yes, you're right. Which leaves Dave without an excuse. What in the ——'s gotten into the man, anyway?"

McKay shrugged and made no answer.

The gloom now was rapidly deepening. José clapped his hands, and from the rear came an attendant bearing a torch. She passed about the room, lighting a number of palm-oil lamps. A soft glow lighted up the place.

"Let food be brought, and wine," commanded José. The girl withdrew. "And, my friends, let us be merry again. We know that Señor Dave lives, and that is much. We shall try to— *Hola!*"

The tapping of a spear-haft at the doorway halted his speech. At his bidding, the spearman entered, leaving his weapon outside. Behind him came a lean man, breathing fast and glistening with sweat, who drew from one ear-lobe a slender section of cane. This he handed silently to José.

A moment, and the Spaniard had extracted from the little tube a rolled paper

As he read the contents, a scowl gathered on his brow. A muttered exclamation broke from him. Again he read the note. Then he questioned the messenger, who showed every sign of a long, hard run.

Some minutes passed in question and answer. José stared thoughtfully at the outer dark. A brief, decisive order terminated the conversation. The pair strode out and turned toward the houses behind.

A moment, and the boom of the big *tunday* roared through the night. From afar floated an answer. Curt, authoritative, the home drum thumped a message. A pause, and the distant log began beating out the same cadence, note for note. At its completion José nodded.

Heavy steps without, and Tim entered on the run.

"What's up, kink? Got a fight comin' off?" he demanded hopefully. "Yer cannon busted up me taty-tate with the li'l priest—I was gittin' religion fast, too. What's doin'?"

"I wish I could tell you, *amigo*. I shall not know until we receive another visitor, whom I have ordered brought here. All I now know is that the country which hounded me out of it now speaks to me again. There has come a voice from the south and west—from Peru.

"Since I left that Peru beyond the mountains no man has heard my full name. So no man knows it except those beyond the mountains, and to them I have long been lost. Yet now comes this note, brought to my men by a Peruvian Indian, who says the writer of it waits alone at the Pastasa for a reply."

Translating, he read:

"Señor Don José Guillermo Monagas Martinez:

"With fervent wishes for your good health (and so on). I have the honor of requesting a conference with you at your most immediate convenience concerning a matter of the most great international importance. I have traveled many leagues and undergone many hardships in my effort to fulfil my orders in this regard, and I beg your most kind consideration.

"I have the honor to sign myself

"Your faithful servitor who kisses your hands,

"MANUEL V. D. R. MONTEZ,

"Lieutenant, Peruvian Force of Security of the East."

CHAPTER XI

THE MESSENGER

IN THE hall which José and his partners had hitherto used as dining-room and council-place, the King of the White Ones now sat in state. He and his people and his Northern guests awaited the arrival of the man from Peru.

Four more days had drifted past while the mysterious envoy, guided by men sent from the farthest outpost, made his way up into the hills. His progress had been reported by brief messages relayed through the *tunday* telegraph, and now he was close at hand. In the interim the visitors had rested from the toil of jungle travel, roamed about the settlement, and viewed the workings of the kingdom arising on the ruins of a lost city.

Wherever they passed along the byways, they had found vestiges of that people whose very name had vanished into the mists of time. Stone-heaps, thickly overgrown by tropical tangle but still revealing mossy corners or edges of square-cut blocks, were met at every few rods—mute monuments to a destroyed civilization and to the awful power of the still smouldering volcanic giants in the west. Only a short distance from each of these ruins was usually a palmwood house and a small plantation of the present inhabitants, each beside a cold, clear little stream, and surrounded by fruit-trees which obviously had belonged to the people dwelling in the houses of stone.

Despite the prevalence of brooks, there were few mosquitoes, as the water was always in motion toward a central creek possessing a subterranean outlet, and stagnant pools were virtually non-existent. The air, too, was constantly moving in fresh breezes, and in the shade of the trees it was delightfully cool. The healthfulness of the location could hardly be surpassed. At no place did the ramblers see man, woman, or child who showed the slightest sign of sickness.

Everywhere the plantation work was done by the Jivero women, always under guard. Yet the observers saw no sign of harshness in their treatment, and at times they found the workers laughing over some simple incident of their toil. They began to suspect that, for his own purposes, José had vastly exaggerated to Nuné the severity with which these prisoners were treated. Certainly they looked sleek and strong, and they worked in leisurely fashion. Few of them were visible at the homes, where the household tasks seemed to be carried on by the women of the White Ones. The only idlers there were the mothers of tiny babes, and even these were usually keeping an eye on older children.

The warriors of the place, though now at home with no new raid in immediate prospect, were by no means lolling about. Some were found carefully instructing boys in fighting craft. Others were seen, in small parties, bringing home heavy loads of game killed outside the valley. Still others were met maneuvering in simulated war-movements, directed by chiefs or sub-chiefs.

Once, in passing along an apparently empty path, the three suddenly found themselves surrounded by a dozen men, armed with machetes, who had leaped like jaguars from the bush and caught them flat-footed. One of them was the grinning Curac, who, by a few Spanish words and expressive gestures, explained that it was a joking test of his men: They had seen the visitors coming, and he had ordered the ambush in order to see which of them was quickest. The Americans, who had instinctively reached for their side-arms, laughed and inwardly thanked their stars that they had left their gun-belts on the rock; for the sudden menace of a gun might have precipitated an automatic retaliation converting the jest into earnest. Even the jokes of these people, it was evident, sprang from the one fixed motive of their every thought and act—war.

On the first morning after their arrival, too, they witnessed another proof of the soldierly qualities of the men and of the grip on them of their ruler. Before the house gathered a number of warriors with complaints, grievances, or problems for settlement in court; and, seated in his tall chair, José heard each case. There was no wrangling, no argument, no apparent animosity; each man stated his side in straightforward fashion and awaited judgment. In each instance José considered a moment before giving his verdict, then gave it briefly and finally. The men faced about and withdrew without a word. Their king had spoken; that ended the matter.

The bruskness of the departure of these men moved Tim, when the session ended, to lodge a humorous complaint against the simplicity of the Spaniard's rule.

"Hozy, this here kingdom o' yourn ain't classy enough," he declared. "Lookit them fellers, now; they turn their backs on ye like ye was nobody. Ye'd oughter train 'em to bump their cocos nine times on the floor and go backin' out with a nose-bleed in honor o' yer majesty. And ye'd oughter wear a gold stove-pipe crown and a long giddy night-shirt and set away up on a throne with steps to it and some o' these here undressed girls layin' round on the steps, and a skipper in yer hand——"

"A what?" snickered Knowlton.

"A skipper. Ye know, a kind of a club the king holds out to make 'em skip——"

"Oh. A scepter. Go on."

"Yeah. And a lot o' dancin'-girls, king; ye sure oughter have them. Kind o' jazz up the place, y'understand. Now it ain't nothin' but an army camp."

"Quite true, friend—that is all it is," laughed José. "And though my men turn their backs to me, they do not turn them to the enemy; and I would rather have them knock other men on the head than knock their own on the floor. As for the other things, I do not care to bother with them. Yet I have a crown somewhere—or had one—I must ask Huarma to find it, for I mean to wear it when Lieutenant Manuel Montez arrives. Whoever he is, he is a pair of eyes for the land beyond the mountains, and when he comes I shall give him something to look at."

And now, with the stranger at his gates, José was keeping his promise. At first sight of him that morning, Tim gasped.

"Hot dog! Look who's here!" he ejaculated. "The King o' the Cannibal Islands, and then some! Kink, I take back every danged word I said. Ye're the goods. Who dressed ye?"

"My wives," chuckled José.

"Faith, ye look it."

"But no, it is unfair to blame my wives for this. I had these things made to wear once each year at a *fiesta* of my people. It pleases them at that time to see their king shine. Now I have simply put them on again to impress the visitor."

"Ye'll knock his eye out, I'll tell the world."

Compared to the plain garments he had hitherto worn, the present raiment of King José was indeed brilliant. His shirt and trousers were of priceless feather-work, the golden breast-feathers of toucans having been woven so cunningly into a web of bark-cloth that from throat to ankles he seemed a golden idol. Only at his waist was there a contrasting shade, and it was striking: A crimson sash, formed by the use of red feathers instead of yellow ones. Whatever the red and yellow may have meant to the White Ones, they were also the colors of Spain.

The crown now resting on the potentate's glossy black hair, too, was Spanish and not Indian; for whereas an Indian chief would surely have worn tall plumes, this man carried on his head only a broad band of beaten gold. And the lean, deep-eyed, eagle-featured face between golden feathers and golden crown was that not only of a Spaniard, but of a Conquistador. For all his jungle panoply, he was every inch a white man; and, for all his jesting, the proud set of his head was that of a man whose word was law.

"I shall give him something to think about," he answered Tim. "Every man of mine within this place is to show himself, with all his weapons, somewhere along the path where the lieutenant shall walk—not as if set there to be seen, but as if he were only one of many more farther back. When he has passed, they are to slip along back paths and gather in the cleared space ahead of him, so that he may see what seems to be another big force of fighters. I am borrowing a trick from the Jiveros, every one of whom always yells in several different tones in attacking a place, so that their force seems much greater than it is. If this man in truth comes to speak of international matters, he shall carry back a tale of a nation that shall make his superiors think."

Presently, from the cliffs to the north, floated two strokes of the *tunday*.

"He enters," said José. "No, do not go. You shall be a part of the play, if you wish. Sit about the table. You are—let me see—my ambassadors from America, England and—ah——"

"Ireland," finished Tim. "Only don't tell me which o' these other guys is the Englishman. I don't want to scrap with either of 'em."

BANTERING one another, they lounged at ease until there came a sound at the door. Through it stalked ten tall warriors, wearing high bonnets of parrot-plumes and swinging long lances of polished *chonta*-wood tipped with steel. They were the reserve members of the guard—the men who never left the rock. Without orders, they ranged themselves behind José, grounded their spear-hafts, and stood motionless—a strikingly effective barbaric background to the golden king. The white men straightened up. From the direction of the path came the faint slither of other bare feet. Then entered the harsh-faced Aillu, carrying a rifle. Behind him came a bronzed, thin-faced, travel-stained Spaniard, followed by half a dozen more of the Sumatara warriors. The latter stopped at the door.

Aillu, retaining the rifle—which was not his own, but that of the newcomer—halted at the foot of the table. The Peruvian slowed. José and his mates, seated about the head of the great board, arose.

"*Bienvenido*—welcome!" spoke the king, with quiet dignity. "You have come far. Will you rest and eat before you speak of your business?"

For a moment the other stopped and stared. The striking figure of the king, backed by his bonneted guards, evidently had made a deep impression. But then, with a bold swagger that might have been copied from José himself in some moods, he advanced again.

"*Gracias*. But no," he answered. "I have been long on the way, and I shall rest better when my word is said."

His voice was metallic, his thin lips a bit cruel, his black eyes keen and calculating, his gaze unwinking. In one quick sweep he took in the three North Americans. Those three, sizing him up in turn, felt that the trick of José in exhibiting—and multiplying—his force had not been wasted. The black eyes were spying everything within their range.

"*Bien*. As you will," replied José. "Sit, and say on."

He sat down. So did the Americans. But Montez, before availing himself of the seat beside him, drew from an inner pocket a small rubber envelope and laid it before José.

"From my commander," he explained, "to show that I am who I say I am."

With that he sat down as if somewhat weary.

"*Bueno*. Have you a knife, Rodrigo? This is sealed."

McKay's pocket-knife slit the flap of the water-proofed container. From it José drew a folded sheet. As he perused it, the girl Saquina appeared from the rear, bearing the wine-jar and a clay cup, which she placed beside the visitor. While she poured a cupful of wine the eyes of Montez dwelt on her comely face and half-nude figure. His thin lips stretched a trifle; and as she walked gracefully away his intent gaze followed her. José, glancing up, caught on his face an expression that made his own eyes quickly narrow.

"*Perfectamente,*" he dryly remarked. "The letter is perfectly correct. Coronel Teófilo Ramirez—of whom I never have heard—introduces you as one bearing words which you will communicate to me, and asks my courtesy to you and your men. Where are the men?"

Montez, with a flourish toward his host, gulped the wine and licked his lips.

"Dead," he callously replied. "We were twelve—I and two *soldados* and nine *Indios.* Now we are one *teniente*—myself—and one *Indio.* We met some Jiveros."

"*Sí?* That is a pity. By what way did you come?"

"We came up the Morona, then by land to Canelos. It was on the land march that we were in trouble. I shall not return by that way, but by the Pastasa. It was necessary first to visit Canelos in order to learn how best to find you."

"And they told you?"

"*Sí,*" grinned Montez. "You are not loved there, Don José. I let them believe that I sought to capture you—alive or dead—and they sped me on my way. These *señores* are the *Norte Americanos* of whom I was told?"

"We are," growled McKay. "Were you to kill or capture us also?"

"*No quiera Dios!* God forbid! It was not known that you had reached Don José. You were spoken of. That is all."

He stared boldly at them, and they stared straight back, leaving the next move to José. He soon made it.

"What is this matter of such great importance?" he asked. "I cannot understand why the commander of a Peruvian force should send a man to me, who am not a Peruvian."

The stare of Montez widened and became blank.

"Not a Peruvian!" he ejaculated. "Not—are you not the José Martinez to whom that letter is addressed?"

"The name is mine. But to Peru I am dead. I now am King José, ruler of my own land; the land which belongs to neither Péru nor Ecuador, but to the White Ones, whom I rule."

Montez leaned again on the table, grinning in relief. Deliberately he poured another drink. When the cup again was empty he looked José squarely in the eye and moved his head significantly toward the Americans.

"You have touched on the very matter of which I mean to speak," he said. "And perhaps it would be to your liking to talk more privately."

"These are my friends. Whatever is to be said can be said before them."

"*Bien.* Then I must mention that some years ago an unfortunate misunderstanding came about between you and Don Francisco Pecoro Torrico, after which Don Francisco—died. It was just after his death that you came eastward——"

"You are forgetting something. Three other men died—all at once; three *asesinos* hired by the greasy Francisco to murder me. Then Francisco, after firing twice at me, died also."

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten the other three; they were of no importance. But Don Francisco was of such position in the government that you very wisely departed. The officials were greatly vexed about the matter—particularly the brother of the deceased, the General Diego León Torrico; so that the army was instructed to shoot you if possible. But, fortunately, it was not possible.

"Now, time makes great changes, Don José. Some time ago, General Torrico died. New officials have been appointed since the last election. And it has been learned that you are alive. After living for years in this horrible wilderness, you are, without doubt, yearning to return to your home and your friends and live as a gentleman should. We feel that some injustice may have been done—yes, that Don Francisco received only what he deserved. So, if you wish to cooperate with the government, I can promise you that the Torrico matter will be forgotten. And, more than that, I am empowered to offer you the commission of *capitán* in the army of Peru!"

CHAPTER XII

THE LURE

FOR a moment José sat like a golden image. Behind him, stark and motionless, the spearmen stood like attendant statues. McKay and Knowlton and Tim, to whom the outlaw had so recently confessed his heart-hunger for the land he had left behind him, turned their eyes to his face. José himself stared straight down the board, at whose foot stood his stony-featured captain, Aillu. And Aillu, understanding none of the words but sensing the development of something affecting his king, leaned forward with eyes glued to his commander.

Perhaps it was the sight of that devoted veteran's tense readiness that steadied José in the face of this staggering offer. At any rate, when he spoke it was in a dry tone giving no hint of its effect on him.

"Your letter spoke of matters of international importance. I see nothing of such importance in this offer. And the offer itself comes rather late."

A shade of disappointment passed over the other Spanish face. Such a nonchalant reception of his craftily dramatic announcement was obviously unexpected and unwelcome to Montez. But he proceeded without delay to place his cards on the table.

"I have told you first the thing which seemed most likely to interest you," he said, "for all of us are interested first in our own fortunes, yes? But now I shall speak of the matter which, as you shall see, is of importance to at least two governments.

"You have just said, Don José, that this land east of the Andes and north of the Amazon belongs to neither Peru nor Ecuador. But there are other minds which do not agree to that. As you know, Ecuador claims that all this land is its Provincia del Oriente, or Eastern Province, and that our Peru owns nothing north of the Amazon. But we of Peru do not allow this, and our government places our northern boundary at the Rio Yapura, north of the Rio Putumayo. And again, the government of Colombia does not agree to this, but swears that the Yapura and all the upper Putumayo belong to Colombia. So all this great land between the Andes and the Amazon, of more than two hundred thousand square miles, rich in gold and rubber and precious roots and priceless woods and other things, is always in dispute.

"Now, because of the difficulties of travel and the hostility of the accursed *Indios*, no settlement of this Oriente has been possible, and because there was no settlement of the land there was no decision of the dispute. But of late this insolent Ecuador has been making moves which show she intends to bring it under her control. So we of Peru also are making moves."

He paused, shrewdly scanning the four listeners. None spoke or betrayed more than casual interest. So he resumed his statement.

"This Ecuador is moving to conquer the land by overcoming the hardships of travel. She is moving through the mountains with a railroad, which already has been built as far as Pelileo, and which she means to bring through the forest to that miserable pueblo of Canelos; and if it is ever completed she probably will make Canelos a large town and try to run boats on the Rio Bobonaza and the Pastasa to the Amazon. So this little kingdom of yours will then be under the power of Ecuador, and you yourself may take orders from a louse-eating Indian governor put over you by the so-great Cortes of Ecuador!"

This stab struck home. Red wrath shot across the face of the outlaw king. For a moment he glared. But he controlled himself.

"I think not," he said, in a tone of repressed passion. "Go on."

"*Bien*. There are other signs, too, of what Ecuador means to do. We have learned that only recently there have been men in the Napo region seeking signs of oil. They were *Norte Americanos*. And it may be of interest to you, Don José, that the railroad creeping toward you is the work of *Norte Americanos*. The *Norte Americanos* and Ecuador work together to conquer this Oriente for what they may gain." Once more he glanced at the three foreigners. "Perhaps, Don José, I am late in reaching you, and these *señores* from the west have already——"

There he paused.

The implication was offensively plain, and so was its purpose; to arouse in the mind of José distrust of these three *Norte Americanos* whose business here was unknown to Montez. McKay glowered and moved as if to rise. José turned to him.

"Do not honor him by noticing him, Rodrigo," he said in English. "Let him think what he likes."

To Montez he said:

"You are quite wrong. Talk of things which you know."

"No offense is intended, *señores*!" Montez hastened to cover up his false step. "I have only the welfare of my country at heart, and I know that Ecuador is reaching, always reaching. Let me go on.

"We of Peru have better sight than Ecuador. We know that the greatest trouble is not in the matter of travel—although that is indeed bad—but in the overcoming of the savages; for those *infideles* can destroy any road, any boat, and the men who travel on it. So we begin at the other end of the difficulty. Already we control the north bank of the Amazon—all its towns are Peruvian. We are a humane people"—he smirked—"and we have long tried to become friendly with the *Indios*. We have tried too long. Now we tire of it. You, Don José, must know what became of Borja, on the Amazon, before you and I were born."

The king nodded, with a rather bored air.

"Ah yes, of course," he said. "The Peruvian government established there a colony of several hundred people, with everything complete, and with a river-steamer for communication with Iquitos. Within a few months the Huambizas attacked it and killed or carried away every inhabitant. Even the houses were destroyed. That was about sixty years ago."

"It is so. And the condition is the same today as it was then. I am of the outpost established near the Morona by our government to hold that land under the Peruvian flag—but I am not of the first force sent there. That first troop was visited by the Huambiza snakes. They came pretending friendship. The *capitán* of the troop was so deceived by them that he showed the leader of the *Indios* how to use his gun. And that chief shot the *capitán* with his own weapon, and the other *Indios* killed all the troop and carried off their heads. That was about ten years ago—in February of 1913—and since that time they have tried to play the same trick on us; for we hold the same place where that other troop was massacred. But we are not so simple, and we still live.

"Now it is very plain that those *barbaros* never can be trusted and always will hold back our country from taking what belongs to her. So there is only one way to handle them. And that, Don José, is what brings me to you. It seems that your wisdom and clear sight is greater than that of our commanders beyond the mountains, and that you have already done the thing of which they have only talked; that is, to make war on the *barbaros* and continue it without mercy. It is only recently that we have heard of you——"

"In what way?" José cut in.

"From a trader, one Pepe Otero, who knew you years ago and since then has sold you guns and cartridges."

"Ah. So Pepe talks. He will sell me nothing more. But Pepe knows nothing of my life beyond the mountains."

"True. But he knows your appearance and your name of José Martinez, and it happens that we have an excellent description of the Don José Martinez who—ah—caused Don Francisco Torrico to—ah—go elsewhere. Ha ha! As I was saying, we feel that so valiant a fighter as yourself should not be lost to Peru—a true Conquistador, *caramba*, of whom our country may well be proud! So we offer you, not only amnesty and full guarantee of safety, but honor; a captaincy, which soon may easily become a much higher rank—yes, that of general! It is necessary only that you continue to fight the Jivero and Huambiza snakes as you are doing now. And that surely is but little to ask."

The deep eyes of the outcast dwelt on him. In them grew a warm glow. Then, for the first time, the saturnine face relaxed in a smile, which became a laugh of rare enjoyment.

"*Por Dios!* It is too rich!" he gurgled. "Comrades, did you ever hear the like? Forgiveness, freedom, and honor from the land that hounded me into the swamps of Brazil, and I am asked only to continue my chosen work! It is too good! Yes—" his laugh ended abruptly— "it is too good—to be true! What surety have I, *señor*, that all this is truth? Have you official papers to prove it?"

"None—as yet," admitted Montez. "But they shall come in time. You will understand that I have traveled in some danger of being killed, and one never knows what may become of a paper. Even in such savage jungle, it might crawl by crooked ways to the hands of Ecuadoreans, and such is not our desire. And—I am honest with you, Don José—this action is not yet sanctioned by our Government. It is the idea of Colonel Ramirez, my commander. But you may be sure that the recommendations of the colonel, when received by the Government, will be approved."

José probed his direct gaze, then nodded. For a few minutes he stared absently at the farthest wall, pleasant thoughts flowing through his mind. Montez quietly poured himself another drink, watching him all the time.

"*Bien*," said José at length. "In what way is the Government to profit by my becoming again a Peruvian?"

"In this way," was the ready reply. "We, on the Morona, intend to request a large increase of forces. We shall send fast runners informing the Government that you, with a strong force and a strategic center, now fight westward; that we must have heavy reinforcements and shall begin a campaign eastward; that we thus shall have the savages between the jaws of a trap; that we must crush the *infieles*—exterminate them—and hold this land by right of conquest. Knowing this, the Government will without doubt impress all available men and rush the campaign. If necessary, we shall try to increase your forces also. In the end, Peru will hold all this region—and hold it forever. Let the Ecuadorean pigs squeal. This shall be the land of Peru!

"And the reward of the Government to her son Don José Martinez will be great, beyond a doubt. José Martinez, whose first blows started the conquest of the East! José Martinez, Conquistador! *Caramba!* Men have become presidents of the republic for actions less notable! *Por Dios!* José Martinez—President of Peru!"

THE BOUNDED up, extending his cup, and, with a dramatic flourish, drank it off and hurled the cup to the floor. José half rose, his face aflame; then caught himself and sank back, masking the sudden exaltation aroused by the toast. Once more he held himself quiet—though rigid—in his chair. When Montez, fired now by the wine and his own eloquence, began again to declaim, the king stopped him.

"Be quiet," he commanded. "Let me think."

Montez sank back, scowling a little. José stared again at the wall. Presently he began musing aloud:

"So the government of Peru would use my forces to win control of El Oriente. And, having won, it would reward my services. Don José would go back as a conqueror to his own people. Ah, yes. To his relatives and to——

"Señor Montez, you seem to know much of the matter which brought me eastward. There was a girl—Dolores. Do you know anything of her?"

"*Sí.* The Señorita Dolores Delavega. I know that she was yours, and it was because of her that Don Francisco sought to—remove you. She now is one of the holy sisterhood, and is seen no more by the world."

"Ah. I have often wondered." José sighed. "So she is in the convent, and that is the end of her."

"So it is, Don José. But there are many other beautiful *señoritas* who will gladly be gracious to the lion of the east. Yes, fair maidens of the highest birth."

"Perhaps. Yet I have devoted women here with me. And men, too, who are faithful to death."

"Ah, of course. The *Indios*. A man must amuse himself. And you have done marvelous work in making such soldiers. But the *Indios* were made only for the use of white men, and when they have served their purpose one need think no more of them."

An enigmatical smile flitted over the lips of José and was gone. He went on as if the other had not spoken:

"And so José leaves the jungle behind him. And into this jungle come many new men who never fought to gain it. They gather many tons of rubber, they search for gold and roots and every valuable thing. And the Government profits greatly by what they find. And since they must have laboring men for all their work, they force all the *Indios* they can find to be their beasts. They rob and cheat and abuse the men of the forest; they drive them with whip and club; they amuse themselves with the women of those men; and those *Indios* who dare to resent such civilized treatment are shot like dogs.

"So these very men who stand behind me now—these White Ones who help win the new country for the Government—are crushed into the dirt and forgotten; for the first thing done by the Government authorities will be to disarm them and leave them helpless in the hands of the brave newcomers who never fought a Jivero, but who are very valiant at torturing Indians who are tame. And all this is the work of José Martinez, who betrayed the people who trusted him."

"But no! The *Indios*——"

"But yes! I have been years in the jungle, and I know what comes to the

Indian at the hands of the white man. And as his reward for this great work, José has the freedom of his own land to the west and the favors of white women—and he bows his neck to the orders of the Government whenever it wishes to use him further. *Bien*. Now suppose, señor, that I refuse to accept this so-wonderful offer; that I refuse to help the Government to conquer this region; that I continue to act as I see fit. What then?"

"Then we must find our help elsewhere. We must try to make use of the Huambizas to destroy the Jiveros—and all others who oppose us. They are treacherous, yes; but if they are rewarded most generously they may work with us until all foes are crushed. Then we must turn on the Huambizas—as they will turn on us—and crush them also. So, in the end, we win. And you——"

"Ah. So I must fight either on the side of the Government or against it. If I am not your ally I am your enemy. I shall not be left free in either case."

"That would be a matter of deep regret to us, Don José, but——"

"I see."

José did not move. Yet he seemed to grow taller, wider, more formidable. His face became stone. His voice turned harsh as the grating of rock against rock.

"You have spoken well. You are a bold and brave man to make this journey. So far as I may, I shall give you protection on your return. Men of mine shall go with you to the Pastasa. You will start back as soon as you have eaten.

"Say to your commander that José Martinez is king in his own land; that he will fight, not as a servant of Peru nor of Ecuador nor of any other Government, but as the king of a new nation; that he has chosen his course and will not change it if all the world comes against him with all its armies; that he will remain king of his people, and king of himself, to the end!

"That is all."

CHAPTER XIII

DREAM'S END

MONTEZ was gone.

His departure had been both unwilling and unhonored. Unwilling, because he had hoped to prolong his visit for two purposes: to argue José into reconsideration, and to pick up all possible knowledge regarding the stronghold of the White Ones. Unhonored, because the deceptive exhibition of jungle troops which had marked his arrival was not repeated on his withdrawal.

José, his decision made and his ultimatum spoken, had refused either to hear more talk or to permit spying. The visitor had not been allowed to leave the council-room even to eat; a meal had been put before him there, and at its end he had been marched straight to the cliff-path and down and out. Attended only by Aillu and the escort which had brought him in, he had passed back to the entry cañon without seeing more than a dozen Indians. José knew that although Montez might have looked twice at the same faces without suspicion, he would hardly fail to smell a trick if he should meet them four times; and he would be using his eyes more keenly on his departure, since his mind would no longer be filled with his message to the king. Wherefore the retreating messenger trod a virtually empty path, vainly scanning the baffling forest and striving to estimate the number of men concealed therein.

After his going, the man who sent him forth was silent and moody. With only a nod to his companions and a sign to his handful of warriors, he strode out and left them to themselves.

"By George, he's a man!" exclaimed Knowlton.

"We've known that for some time," observed McKay.

"Sure. But think of turning down the one thing he's been longing for, just for the sake of making good with this bunch of Indians. Now he's burned all his bridges; condemned himself for life. 'Among Indians I must live, and in the jungle I must die!' "

"Yeah. But listen here. If he did quit his own gang now he'd be a deserter," Tim pointed out. "He'd be yeller. And it ain't in him to be yeller—either now or tomorrer or the next day. One thing about Hozy, he's always figgerin' on tomorrer and the day after. Most guys in his place would have been satisfied to look at tomorrer—meanin' the day when he could go back west and be a swell again. But he had to look way past that and see what would happen the day after tomorrer, and that spoilt tomorrer. Spoilt this here, now, Monty's game, too. Say, cap, d'ye s'pose that P'roo bunch'll really hook up now with them Warm Beezers?"

"The Huambizas? No chance. That was a bluff," answered McKay. "The Huambizas would just collect their heads——"

"Great Scott! Listen, Rod!" This from Knowlton, who had started as if struck by an astounding thought. "You know the Huambizas have been on the rampage lately. We've been blaming it on Dave. Maybe it goes further back, and this scheming Colonel Ramirez is behind it. His object is to get everybody in this region to kill off somebody else. Playing both ends against the middle. Double-crossing all hands."

The tall Scot and the stocky Irishman stared and scowled. McKay grudgingly nodded.

"Might be. When it comes to international land-grabbing there's no trick too dirty to use," he conceded. "But Dave—where does he come in? He's certainly not a tool of Peru."

"No. That's impossible. All the same—Confound it, we've got to yank Dave out of there somehow!"

Knowlton bounced up and began prowling to and fro.

"Yeah. That's right. And our best bet is ol' Hozy here. He'll be startin' somethin' right away, I bet ye, and our game is to trail along. It's the only chance we got."

McKay nodded again. Knowlton said nothing. Tim arose and ambled outward; cast an eye about, seeking José; saw nothing of him, and drifted toward the house where dwelt the women and children. As he approached it he stopped, listening; then turned and trotted back.

"Hey! Come and listen," he stage-whispered.

They followed. Nearing the family-house, they slowed. Soft and low, from somewhere within that home floated the strains of a violin.

In mournful minors, these notes reached into the hearts of the wanderers who had just seen their old-time comrade stalk silently from the conference in which he had renounced all hope of seeing again the land of his birth. Slowly they went on to the deserted piazza, and there they leaned in the shade, feeling like eavesdroppers listening to a confession. The player was not repeating any known air; he was putting into strange, haunting music what he would never put into words—a pathos which no words could convey. And the men outside, as the bow continued to drift over the plaintive strings, saw and heard and felt the same vision as the man within.

A land of darkness and of silences, wherein crawled savage rivers and crept nameless creatures of the gloom. The drip and drizzle of rain; the sough of lonely winds; the brief cries of stricken bird or beast or man. Far on the horizon, a wall of mountains touched with golden sun. Down in the mist and murk of the forest, a man who struggled toward the mountains—and was clutched and held by shadowy tentacles reaching for him amid the gloom. One by one those merciless coils fastened upon him until he was held powerless. The sunlit hills faded into dimness; the light itself died out; the forest and the man were swallowed in a vast black void. Then the music itself died into silence.

But presently it stole again into the air. The mists thinned out. The strangling, clutching monster enwrapping the man loosed its hold. He passed onward—no longer striving toward the vanished mountains, but marching with inexorable tread into a land peopled by demons. Behind him now glided other men: first a few, then more and more, then an army; strong, lithe, deep-eyed, firm-jawed men who, like their leader, turned aside for nothing. Came the clash and shock of battle. The demons, swarming with hideous grimaces into the mêlée, fell back and went down. And then the great forest was flooded with light—the same sunlight which had glowed on the unattainable heights. And over all swelled a pæan of triumph, through which sounded the rhythmic beat of drums, the roar of exulting warriors, the laughter of women and the shouts of happy children—the throbbing, thrilling battle-song of a victorious nation.

AGAIN the violin was silent. It spoke no more. Presently footsteps sounded softly within, and through the doorway came a pair of young women carrying tiny mites of humanity which stared round-eyed at the quiet men leaning against the posts. The women, too, looked with some surprize at the visitors, but not with so much interest as they received in return. One of them was a young wife of

José, with her latest-born; the other was Nuné, in whose arms the babe lay as restfully as if in the embrace of his own mother. Once more, in some indefinable way, the strange girl from the land of the head-hunters seemed to have changed. With the naked infant resting against her bosom, she who had been priestess and nymph and charmer now was a Madonna.

"José?" questioned Knowlton, gesturing toward the interior and thus explaining their presence.

"He will come," briefly replied the young wife.

Making no effort to summon the master, she sank into a hammock. Nuné remained standing. With evident reluctance, she surrendered her own burden to the mother, who nonchalantly took it with a free arm. Straightening, the girl turned to Tim, speaking with the directness of an Indian and a familiarity which showed that she regarded him as her best acquaintance there.

"Teem, the man is gone? Who was he?"

"A man from the Morona."

"Morona! He had news of my people?"

"No!"

"Teem, you do not speak truth! A man of the Morona must know of my people. Unless he was of Macas. Was he a *Padre?*"

"No. A bad man from far down by the Amazon."

"A bad man! And he was allowed to go? He was not killed?"

"No. Ask Hozy. Here he is." Relapsing into his usual speech, he added: "Jest in time, Hozy. I'm gittin' pumped, and I dunno how much ye want her to know. Give her the dope yerself."

José, emerging from the inner shadow, was himself again. His crown and his feathered garments were gone, and he was once more garbed in his slouchy bark-clothes. Moreover, his head was high and his face alight with good humor. With only a glance at Nuné, he stepped to the hammock, deftly picked one of the royal mites from the mother's breast and lifted it high in the air.

"Make haste, little prince, and grow!" he exhorted. "The time is short, for already men seek to steal away your father and make of him a monkey. Soon he will grow old, and then you and your brothers must protect him. Hurry, little rascal, and grow big!"

With terrifying speed he swung the babe down again, stopping it as lightly as a feather above its mother's bosom, then laying it gently in her arms. Though the little fellow's eyes had opened wide, he made no whimper. Contentedly he cuddled beside his twin. José stretched his arms wide and laughed.

"Behold, the devil came to King José," he said, "and put into his hands the desire of his heart. And behold, when the king had that thing before his nose, it began to smell bad. And he handed it back to the devil, and pushed the devil out of his house, and played a tune on his fiddle, and so it ended."

"No regrets?" quizzed McKay.

"No regrets, comrade. Indeed, I am most heartily glad. I had a dream which tormented me much, and now it is gone, and it will come back no more. Why? Because it was born of bitterness, and the bitterness was born from the fact that I could not go back. Now I have had the power to go back if I willed; yes, I have had the satisfaction of being begged to go back by the very Government that cast me out; and of my own will I refused. And the torment has ended, for the bitterness has died.

"I know now that I should not be happy in the land beyond the mountains. This jungle, where I have suffered much and which I have bitterly cursed many a time, would haunt me to my grave. It would call to me, and it would curse me as I have cursed it, because I betrayed it for a dream. It is a fierce, cruel old mistress, but it has been more kind to me than the land of my youth. So I shall be faithful to it, and to the men and women and children it has given me."

Again he looked affectionately at the little family group. Then he turned to Nuné. Thoughtfully he studied her.

"Nuné, is it still your desire to leave this place?" he asked. "Do you wish to go forth alone and travel the many long leagues through the forest, to become again a wandering servant of Piatzo among the Huambizas?"

The girl was silent. Her dark eyes dwelt on the verdant hills forming the wall of the stronghold, visualizing the weary leagues of menacing jungle stretching away beyond; the fearful struggle of plodding on and on and on, soon exhausting the little food she could carry and then being forced to subsist like an animal on what small life she could kill; the black nights alone and shelterless, the unbridged streams, the prowling Jivero and jaguar, the myriad hardships and dangers of the long traverse. Unconsciously her fingers stole within her dress to the crude cross given her by the mad priest. When at length she spoke, it was with an effort—

"Nuné must return to her people."

"Must?" repeated José. "Must? In her heart Nuné does not wish to go."

She sighed. Her gaze went to Tim. Then she looked down at the ground.

"Do these three remain here?" she asked in a small voice.

"For a time only. Then they go to their own land, which is far away."

Her head lifted again. Once more she looked at the three; and now her gaze was impersonal and cool. Once more she said—and said with firm decision—

"Nuné returns to her people."

"*Bien.* So it shall be. But Nuné does not go alone. Soon we go to Rana. Nuné goes with us."

A quick light filled her face, succeeded by a shadow of distrust. But her reply was simple and serene.

"It is well."

Without another look at any of the four, she passed through the doorway and was gone.

"And that's the way it goes," sighed Tim, half-humorously. "Every time I git me a girl she leaves me flat for somebody else. But every time I look at a poor married guy worryin' about his family—yeah, even you, Hozy—I think mebbe I'm a lucky boob at that. Lucky in love, that's me; I don't never git married and spoil the fun o' livin'. Did I hear ye say somethin' about movin' west, kink? When do we pull out?"

"Very soon. As soon as I can make ready. And then we move fast—and strike hard."

His tone was grim. Tim's face grew sober, and he eyed José curiously. The others, too, became grave, probing the expression on the ominous countenance of the fighting king. Now that his torturing dream of return to his native land was ended, would he be more ruthless than ever in pursuing his later dream of conquest? Would he, if he reached David Rand, slay him as remorselessly as any other Huambiza? If he did, more than one hope centering on that wild man would be slain also; and so would one long-existent fact—their friendship for José Martinez.

While they studied him, he returned an inflexible, unreadable gaze which seemed to search their own minds. Then he turned from them and reentered the house. They stood a moment longer, then drifted back toward their own quarters, saying not a word.

CHAPTER XIV

FORWARD

OVER the rim of the mountain wall leered the ghostly visage of War. Invisible, intangible, yet real as the rocky steeps themselves, it hung about the outer jungle and watched the movements of the people within the bowl. And day after day there arose from the homes of the White Ones, like a tribute, a steady haze of smoke.

That grinning fantom, always lurking near, had lifted its head at the bidding of the Spaniard who ruled the region. The smokes, too, had begun to rise at the word of the hawk-faced king. It had been a very simple matter, devoid of any such ceremony or mysticism as might, in more ancient times, have attended the conjuring of an all-powerful shade from the realm of spirits. The king had merely summoned to his eyrie his chiefs and their sub-chiefs and spoken briefly to the conclave, and the thing was done.

The smokes were those of undying cookfires preparing the campaign-food for an army. The army itself was, in small detachments, ranging the forest for miles in all directions, silently warring with blowgun and arrow on the little people of the upper world—monkeys. Other animals, and birds too, were slain and brought home by the killers, but such meat was devoted only to the present needs of the families. Of the rich red monkey-flesh not an ounce was eaten. All of it went into the clay stew-pots bubbling over the flames.

The women of the White Ones were working now. For the nonce, the children got scant attention. In fact, the older children too were all at work. While their mothers presided at the pots, the boys became butchers, skinning and cutting up the animals dumped on the floors by their male elders; and the girls, sitting beside piles of boiled yuca root, chewed and chewed and chewed.

"To make an army, one must have three things—men, and weapons, and food," José commented. "Men without weapons have little power, and men without food have no power at all. If you will come down below, friends, I think I can show you something new in the way of food for fighting men."

"You'll have to go some," laughed Knowlton. "When we were in France we stowed away some weird stuff."

On entering a smoky Sumatara house and observing a pile of freshly cut meat, he added:

"Nothing new about this, José. We've smoked monkey-meat many a time."

"Ah, *sí*. But look more closely, *amigo*. This is not being smoked."

"Oh, I see. Stewing it. But it won't keep."

"No?"

From a little pile of what seemed short lengths of firewood, José picked one at random. As he held it up, the others saw that it was a section of bamboo, and that the ends were capped.

"There is your meat," he said. "See. Yonder more meat stews. When all strength is boiled from the meat, the bones and the shreds are thrown out and the liquor is boiled down——"

"Hm! Meat extract!"

"That is it. A pure paste, with pepper and other spices, sealed in these tubes. The caps are of strong leaves and bark strips which dry hard and tight. Much food with little weight. This is my own idea, which I have taught my people. And here," nodding toward a chewing girl, "is an idea for which I am not responsible and which may not be so pleasant to you."

As he spoke, the girl took from her mouth the yuca root which she had been masticating; placed it carefully in a clay dish holding a small mound which somewhat resembled mashed potato; tossed another chunk of yuca into her mouth, and resumed her jaw-work. The Americans watched her, suspicion and repulsion growing on their faces.

"*Masata!*" guessed McKay. "I've heard of the stuff, but never saw it made. Your people eat *masata?*"

"Truly," answered the Spaniard, with a grin of enjoyment at the evident distaste of the others. "Through all this country *masata* is the favorite food; the yuca root mixed with the saliva of the ladies. The Jiveros all use it; they call it *giamancha*. One puts it in water and drinks it. It is very nourishing: one mouthful of yuca has the strength of four mouthfuls of potato. And there is no other way of preserving the root than by this chewing."

"Ugh! Me, I'd go hungry a long time before touchin' that stuff," asserted Tim.

"Quite likely. It is all a matter of prejudice. My men would not think of starting on a long trail without it. It will be sealed as carefully as the meat, and used as needed. With only these two kinds of food we could march many a long league. And with the things we may pick from the forest, we shall not suffer."

"Especially tapirs," said Knowlton. "Seems to be plenty of those big beasts hereabouts."

"That is one thing for which we can thank our head-hunting friends," smiled José. "It is against their religion to kill the tapir."

The others eyed him quizzically.

"Religion?" scoffed McKay. "Since when have those murderers had religion?"

"It is true," José affirmed. "They believe in a god of rivers and rain, who orders the quick rise and fall of the streams and the coming of showers at good or bad times for their crops. And they believe that his favorite creatures are the tapir, which lives much in the rivers; the *yacumama*—the great water boa—and the frog. He is likely to take the shape of any one of these things himself, if he is in the mood. So the Jiveros are afraid to touch the tapir, the snake, or the frog, because the god might be angered, and then he would cause a great flood which would destroy all the people."

"Hm! And do your people believe this?"

"But no. They are a little afraid of the great devil-snake—and who is not?—but they kill and eat the tapir as gladly as they kill the shrinkers of heads. They eat the frog also. The only superstition my White Ones have is that I myself am at least half a god and can never be overcome. And you may be sure that I do not dispute them."

"Faith, they could believe lots o' worse things," remarked Tim. "I ain't never seen ye licked yet."

"When you do see it you will see me dead," was the simple answer. "You know what defeat means in this land. Until now I have always won."

A slight shadow passed over his face. He seemed about to say more, but no words came. Abruptly he passed doorward. McKay eyed him cornerwise.

"Until now?" he suggested.

Outside, José paused, sweeping a look around his guarded hills. His lips opened; closed; opened again.

"Until now," he echoed. "Somehow, Rodrigo, I feel uneasy now. I do not know why. Yet it is a feeling which I have seldom known to fail—the feeling which more than once has saved me when I was alone in the forest; that some danger was near. It has been upon me ever since I gave my captains the command to prepare to march, and it grows stronger hour by hour. Something gnaws at me, telling me not to go forth."

Again he looked along the rim of jungled rock, his expression vaguely troubled.

"Never before have I felt so when about to start away," he concluded. "Always I have been sure of victory."

Knowlton cast his gaze around the wall, then laughed.

"You're too much married, old chap," he rallied. "I've seen lots of fellows like you. When they were single they'd grab the devil by the tail and tie a knot in it, but after they got wives they began to grow that worried look that's on your handsome face right now. Forget it!"

He slapped the brooding king on the shoulder. At the tingling impact José straightened, and his somber expression dissolved.

"Perhaps you have it right, *teniente*," he grinned. "I am a man of many burdens. Hah! But, *por Dios*, I still can tie a knot in the tail of the devil! Do not think that José Martinez is so woman-ridden as to skulk from a fight, even if it be his last. *Vamos!*"

And on the way back to the rock he swaggered along with the buccaneering swing which had been his in the days of lone bush-ranging, a price on his head and a dare in his eyes to any man to come and get it.

AT THE main house, which had been their living-quarters ever since their arrival, they found a dozen newly arrived Sumataras, each squatting beside a tight-woven hooded pack-basket. On the approach of the whites, the men arose. One who seemed to be their leader spoke briefly to José, ending by throwing back the lid of his basket. Within it showed sealed tins and a rubber-wrapped bundle. At a word from José, the twelve lifted the rattan containers, carried them into the inner room habitually used as dormitory by the North Americans, and dumped them. The adventurers, who had followed, gazed at their own equipment, which had been cached weeks ago on the bank of the Bobonaza.

"How come?" puzzled Knowlton. "We didn't send for this stuff. How'd they find it?"

"I sent them for it," nonchalantly explained José. "You mentioned that you had left it on a hill one day's journey below Canelos. So I told a *sargento* of my army to go and find it. It was easy for him."

"Hm! And we'd have defied all the Indians in the world to find that cache."

"You do not know my men. Wait until you see them smell out a hidden town of the head-hunters."

To the spokesman of the dozen he monotoned a few words, receiving a single syllable in reply. At another short sentence from him, the strong mouths widened in swift smiles. Then the carriers stalked out.

"They have seen no sign of enemies. I have told them that the enemy shall soon see signs of us. Now I go to see to various matters. Let your load for this march be of cartridges only. All else shall be provided."

And he was gone to look after some new detail of preparation.

Left alone, the seekers of David Rand fell to scanning their cans and tightly closed duffle-bags, plainly marked with waterproof paint or varnished tags. Old campaigners all, they had burdened themselves only with necessities; yet the necessities constituted a sizeable pile. From it they selected as much ammunition as could well be carried; spare gun-cleaning kits; and new footgear—soft, flexible, but tough boots of the high moccasin type. With the addition from their everyday duffle of a light blanket, an extra shirt, a medical packet, and the inevitable tooth-brush, matches and tobacco, each was fully equipped except for food and bed. For these they relied on the White Ones, who possessed trail-hammocks much lighter than their own stout hanging nets.

When José again looked into the room he found the confusion of spilled equipment transformed into a compact pile in a corner; three small heaps beside the wall; three army pack-carriers, with web belts bulging with cartridges, hanging from pegs; and three rifles, machetes, and holstered pistols under the harnesses. The men who owned these things were ready to go. Splashes and masculine mirth from the bathing-pool at the rear told where they now were.

It was two days later, however, before José and his own men were ready to depart. Far into the night burned the fires, reducing the monkey-meat to its most portable form; and before the early-rising Americans strolled forth to look at the new day the smoke-mist was already stealing abroad again. Meanwhile every available man made his travel-preparations or worked at the defenses of the place; for José was leaving behind him only a skeleton garrison, and from three out of the five entrances and their trails he took every watchman. Each of these deserted passages was blocked, however, as effectively as if guarded by the usual custodians; into the cañons were hurled thorn-trees, forming masses whose wicked spikes would repel all creatures except those endowed with wings. For months to come—until the slowly drying trees could be cleared away by fire—those passages would be useless to the White Ones as well as to any invaders. But José was determined to leave no approach unguarded during his absence.

The other two trails and portals, with their guardians, were left unchanged. So was the guard on the central rock. And to the women and the boys was left a supply of aboriginal arms, in the use of which they were well versed.

Then, on the third morning, the army moved. Bare-foot, bare-armed, with machete pendent at his belt, bullet-pouch slung under one arm, and rifle in his fist, José strode across the upper ground and, without a parting word or look for his family, swung down the cliff path. Behind him, packs rolled snugly at their backs and guns across their shoulders, marched McKay and Knowlton and Tim. And at Tim's heels, her level eyes questing the distances, came Nuné; once more garbed in her simple robe, which she would doff as soon as she had passed through the gateway, to become again a girl of the forest.

Out along the woods path they filed, finding every byway crammed with armed men bearing basket-packs. These, headed by their subordinate officers, fell in behind. Rod by rod the line lengthened as each side alley debouched its detachment. When it had passed, the by-paths held only women and children who had come to watch the going of the expedition. No farewells were spoken; no man looked back; no call or cry came from wife or daughter. Stoically each woman stood and looked her last on the mate who might never return; then withdrew to her home, to wait through long weeks.

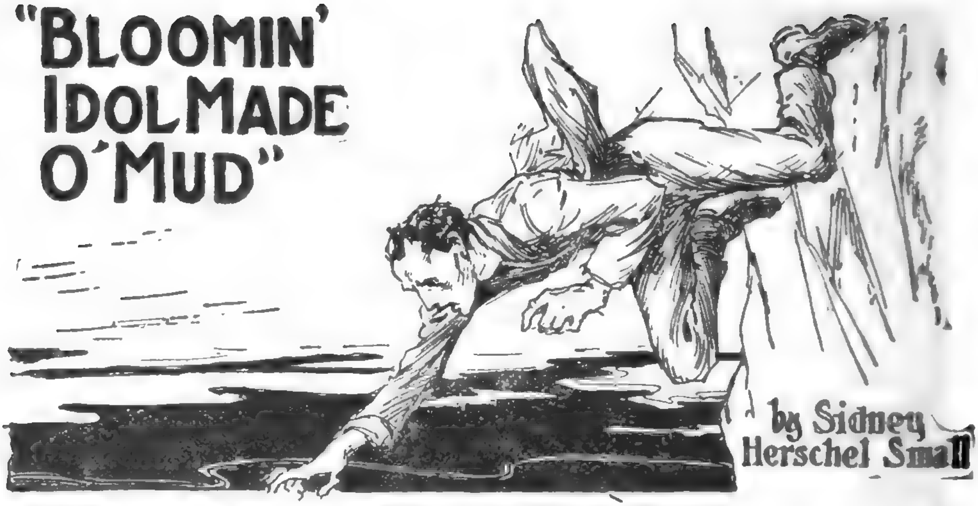
At the top of the stiff climb into the cañon of exit, Tim glanced back and down. As far as he could see along the path, men were coming in a steady file which seemed endless. Meanwhile McKay, always looking forward, saw that now José was preceded by Indians who evidently had waited in the ravine. These, he surmised, formed the vanguard, under either Aillu or Curac; and scouts probably were half a mile or more in advance.

Into the rocky cleft they swung, and on through it, and down the winding track beyond. The following line, enviously watched from above by the guards doomed to remain at home, poured after them in a living stream. At length the walls ceased to whisper with the slither of marching feet. Empty and silent yawned the rift, devoid of life except for the human hawks stationed at its brink. The army had vanished into the vast green sea of trees beyond.

The guards grunted sourly and turned to their duties. Their keen eyes ranged back and forth, sweeping the accustomed vista within and without their wall. They missed nothing; nothing, that is, which lay within mortal ken. Yet there was one thing, grim and sinister, which even their trained sight did not perceive. That was the lurking fantom which still reared its head invisible against the sky; which grinned and gibbered soundlessly as it watched the long line go crawling away through the jungle—and which then leered down more maliciously than ever at the women and children left behind.

TO BE CONTINUED

"BLOOMIN' IDOL MADE O'MUD"



by Sidney Herschel Small

Author of "Down Dim Passages," "Mother of Beggars," etc.

THE *Hanaleii* was breaking her back upon a reef long held sacred to Hayachi, god of whirlwinds; it bore his name, but was no less dreaded for that. She was ending ingloriously. No smother of spume veiled her, but a miserable mist did, a watery haze which had snared her upon the rocky spine; now and again it shredded apart, revealing the little single-stacker stationary where she was held, but already weaving back and forth at the ends. Even the shrimp-catchers knew she could not last long.

The wind blew toward the shore, and with it was a lee-tide. Noshiro offers no landing-place for anything save fishing-craft; craggy cliffs project concavely from the water, the summit a good ten feet beyond the base, which is iron-colored from the uptwisting sand of the undertow. High tide may best be known to those offshore by a narrow shelf where a soft chalk deposit has been washed out—the cliffs are streaked with white markings of it elsewhere—here the water touches, and recedes.

Fishermen stood on the plateau above their bare legs planted against the wind. Kotohari, the eldest, voiced the common opinion:

"She will crack like a nut in a god's fingers. Then *they* will wash ashore. In various conditions."

The missonary of Hishiura, Gilbert Clark, licked his lips. He knew that there remained nothing to be tried. Earlier, with Kotohari's help, he had tried to reach them, using the fisherman's sampan, but the whipping wind had overturned them on a sandpit, and lost Kotohari his boat as well. The tide had brought them to shore, although both men had fought against the undertow before they could reach the shore to northward.

Clark knew that if the men on the coaster would jump, the tide would bring them ashore; he was wet from the capsizing, and, being cold, thought of a beacon. Kotohari, to whom he mentioned it, glanced wordlessly at the single pine which stood wretchedly on the cliff-top. Suddenly Clark funneled his hands and called. The wind wailed him down.

To keener ears than ordinary came ominous creakings, the snarl of giving rivets, changing swiftly to a dull moan, and with that uncanny noise came a loud grinding. Clark was elate: the ship would break up before the tide changed, and some of the crew would float ashore. The *Hanaleii* shook herself, seemed to slip deeper into the reef's fangs, and, as all could see dimly through the haze, began to lower at bow and stern. The Japanese grunted, straining forward; above them, Clark stood shivering to the gale—but no longer cold—his face full of grief and pain.

"They come," Kotohari muttered. "Pray, C'ark-san. As for us, a rope is more to our purpose." To a comp:anion "Give it to me, Kitigawa. I will go first."

He turned to Clark, adding:

"I go to the slice at the bottom of the

cliff. When they come near, I will swim for them, and other of our fishermen, who will come down after me, will drag us to the shelf."

An end of the rope was looped about Kotohari, under his arm-pits, the other wrapped about the pine's trunk. Fishermen grasped it tightly, a hollowed rock was used as a groove for the rope to run in, and, before the missionary could gather his thoughts, Kotohari was crawling over the edge. He grinned once, and was out of sight.

Clark watched the rope pay out, saw it swing as Kotohari used it as a pendulum to reach the shelf, watched other men slide down it, leaving only a half-dozen to handle it above.

The *Hanaleii* was no longer to be seen; the mist swept apart none at all. Clark tried to pierce the gloom, his eyebrows arched to their highest; once or twice his lips moved, and he seemed crying out upon himself. He felt strangely hot, moved by he knew not what. He wished he might see.

"The mist goes!" a man said, at the instant of the thought.

True, the wind had veered, and a pale sky was showing. The *Hanaleii* was banging and slipping with each crash; filling as she must be, Clark knew that once she presented her side, she would be battered down. He remembered, fearfully, the floating hatch of a boat he had once seen go down, with a shred of cotton-cloth stuck to a nail on it.

Black bits began to float shoreward, sloughed off by the ship. Heads, coming nearer: he heard Kotohari's howling orders below, and his own body grew wet with mental exertion; he was swimming for them, and once a Japanese looked at him askance as he blew imaginary water from his mouth.

The *Hanaleii* yammered, every plate shrieked, she twisted, her decks careened, slanting deeply; more black ants dropped into the water, and with them a portion of a tale-telling smashed boat. Clark jumped as one of the fishermen cried unintelligible words; the fellow's face was distorted.

"See, C'ark-san! The gods are not with us today."

Clark looked, and saw the water was becoming smooth, as if soothed by a god's hand.

"The waves are going down!" the missionary shouted happily. In sudden fear he asked, "Is it that the tide is changing?"

"Not that. See—the black water—that makes the boat go instead of coal—see—it is on the water. Look closely!"

Clark looked, and shuddered at what he saw. Oil was oozing from the broken tanks, spreading, encompassing the poor unfortunates shoreward. Only those who jumped first were free from the oil, the others would be strangled mercilessly. He could look no more, shut his eyes; was aware only from shouts that Kotohari was at work, and that several of the swimmers had been dragged to the shelf in the rocks.

He was half-unaware of the mens' comments: that the swimmers should find a board floating, and use it to keep their heads above the oil. But, the voices said, the men were crazed with fear, and tried for the land, instead of swimming to the nearest board. "Mah!" loudly, "one is going, for his hands are up—" a long gasp—"he is gone!"

Clark opened his eyes; he did not see the sinking figure, saw only the spreading black pool, calming, like the death it brought. He did see other fighting figures. He wished impotently that he might help, but knew that if Kotohari could not swim out, none could; how, then, could the victims be told what to do? Fascinated, he edged to the brink, and peered down. He could not see the shelf hidden in the cliff's concavity; saw only water like quicksilver, with reflections of scudding high clouds. His eyes went up, to the spreading oil.

"What can any one do?" he repeated aloud; he was on his knees, and closed his eyes tightly.

"He prays," the fishermen told one another, and then Kotohari called for them to pull.

Clark knelt beside the rope's groove. As the fishermen pulled, several shrimp-catchers came close to that spot, to seize the man as soon as he appeared, and drag him back. They grunted in unison with the pullers. Clark was blind and deaf to it all; strangely, he did not pray, but asked for guidance, detached completely from the close action.

"What must I do to help them?" he whispered, and held out his arms, as if to draw the swimmers out of the oil-pool, and to safety.

At the same instant as the outward motion of Clark's arms the body reached the top. An arm extended upward, a frightened arm, eager for the touch of something human after the awful, swinging ride. It found Clark's outstretched hand, closed over it with fiendish force; Clark opened his eyes hastily, pulling back.

His knees slipped forward on the smooth rock; his shoes found no foothold, he was able to bear no weight against this force which pulled him forward—the pullers, seeing, jerked quickly—Clark cried aloud once, although none knew what he said, and—all in the same split-second—lost balance completely, and was over the edge.

THE dead leaves were driving about the mission-house at Noshiro before the same violent wind that lashed the sea beyond the cliffs; the mist was lighter, but dripped from every thatched eave. A fire had been lighted, and the Noshiro missionary, Woodhouse, a bald man, sat talking to his mustached sister, a missionary in her own right. She was not listening, but watching the man who stood just outside the door, reading an old States newspaper.

"Will that man be here long?" she asked softly. "He does not like Clark. At the meeting tonight there will be a fight. Every one will speak of it. 'That fight at Woodhouse's,' they'll say."

"We must fight for the right, Cora. It is never you to waver, Cora. Why, my dear Cora——"

"Cora, Cora, Cora! Caw! Caw! Caw! Are you—are all of us—crows? Jabbering nonsense, and missing the best? Sometimes I wonder, Dick!"

The man at the door, Dr. M'Kay, the district supervisor, stepped in.

"Clark back?" he asked.

Woodhouse shook his head.

"Still wandering in the rain! Possibly—" M'Kay's lips curled—"worshipping the rain-god with them, eh? I was talking to your son, Woodhouse," he added gruffly. "He looks up to Clark as if the man were a heathen idol!"

Woodhouse bent his head, taking this as censure.

"It is largely because there are so many rumors about. They call Clark the 'fighting priest,' you know. Tom is like boys the world over. Admires physical qualities, even if they aren't real. Or true. He believes these stories."

"We'll go over them later," M'Kay said grimly. "Personally, I'd like to see Clark in an emergency. I fancy I know how he'd act!"

Miss Woodhouse sat upright.

"You are correct, doctor," she said firmly. "It is an evil influence on Thomas. And—for his sake—I do hope there will be no loud discussion. We have insisted that Thomas believe all missionaries are—perf—no, not perfect, but at least——"

"I understand, Miss Woodhouse," M'Kay cut in, pleased.

"And now it is hard, after that, to have him hear Mr. Clark is so very——"

"Do not worry, Miss Woodhouse." M'Kay waved his hands. "All will be done quietly and coolly. All that we desire to impress upon Clark is that we wish fewer *spectacles*, and more souls saved. We want——"

He turned abruptly as the door burst open.

Both M'Kay and Woodhouse took in the intruder with wide eyes, but the woman, after one look, closed her own tightly, and kept them shut.

The shrimp-catcher who had come, in answer to Kotohari's screamed order, stood dripping on the very carpet that had come to the Orient with the Woodhouses: it was being ruined by water, but she did not shut her eyes to that. The better to run, the shrimp-catcher had shucked off his ragged short kimono, and stood bare of limb and body, with only a strip about his loins, his muscles twitching from exertion, his breath coming in great gulps. He was too exhausted to be afraid in the presence of the *seiyo-jin*, and too breathless to give the words he had: another moment, however, and these came tumbling forth in hissing Japanese, faster than any of them could venture to interpret even their meaning.

M'Kay helped out. He was new to the Orient, and did not understand Yamato Japanese, to say nothing of the provinces, but he could read the human countenance.

"There has been an accident!" he said brightly.

Woodhouse called for the houseboy.

"Tell him to put on trousers!" was his first request.

The houseboy did, but was cut off with a wild flow, ending with the statement that if the *seiyo-jin*, and the *jini-san* also, did not come to the cliff, Kotohari would give him, the shrimp-catcher, the split bamboo; what was all this talk of leg-garments, anyhow?

The houseboy interpreted:

"He say C'ark-sañ fall in water. Come see."

M'Kay gave Woodhouse no opportunity to answer.

"There are people there, boy?" he asked, and, as a nod, added: "Well, when they fish him out, have him brought here. We'll have dry clothes for him."

"Boat on rocks also," the servant added calmly. "Many drown, maybe."

Here M'Kay showed his presence of mind. He fell on his knees, and lifted his voice in prayer, for mercy and for salvation for the dying.

"What is all this talk, Matsuro?" the shrimp-catcher asked the boy. "First it is of leg-clothing, and now of—what?"

Matsuro told him in a coast dialect he was certain his master did not know.

"*Hai!*" the other chattered with cold, "will that bring any one out of the sea? It is wrong, these *seiyo-jin* say, to pray to Mi-kumari, the sea-god, that we do not fall in, but they pray to get out again! Ours is the better way. As for praying, will that bring their priest to them? Do not the fools know the tide changes? Can they do nothing save talk?"

M'Kay rose from his knees.

"There!" he exclaimed. "I feel better. Now, if you have a rain-coat—no? An umbrella, then? Good! Do not worry, Miss Woodhouse. We will be perfectly safe. A boat on the rocks. Dear, dear. But the coast-guard will launch a boat, or shoot a rope to them, and all will be well. As to Clark, he is out by now, rest assured. With hundreds around him, he jumps into a puddle of shallow water, and then will talk of it as if— I see how these stories of his start now! And sending this naked man! He thought of that, knowing what we were up to. He figured it would deter us!"

An umbrella was handed him.

"One will become used to these tropical storms, I suppose—" buttoning his coat tightly—"but, Miss Woodhouse—" wagging a finger—"no worrying!" and they were gone.

Woodhouse walked ahead, M'Kay plowing through the rain behind. He knew, did M'Kay, that he would have a sore throat in the morning, but his duty was clear before him. He walked carefully through the muck of the Noshiro ways, but to no avail: puddles found him out, and this made him feel no more kindly toward the erring Clark. Woodhouse heard him mutter things which boded Clark little good: something of galavantin' with natives, when there were souls to be saved. As they marched forward the headlands seemed to shut the rain off, and the sky became clearer.

Suddenly, all at once, they were out of the thick air, and the cliff path, jagged, narrow, caused M'Kay to draw a deep breath.

"Do we go up there?" he asked needlessly. "If we must, we must," he sighed.

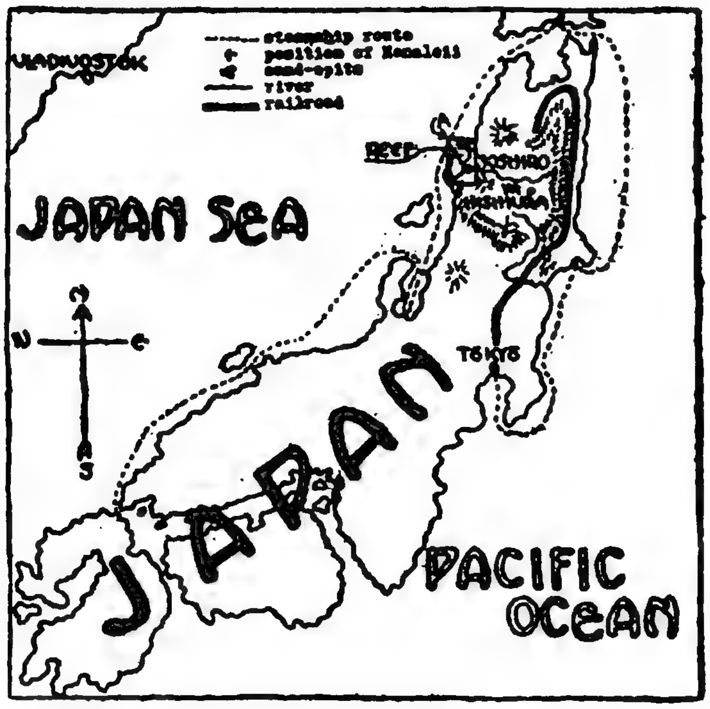
More than once Woodhouse slowed up for M'Kay was the way steepened, and the path fell away to a mere stubble of crumbly rock; when it reached the ridge which led to the plateau where the wind-bent pine stood M'Kay—with some mumble of a weak ankle—dropped on hands and knees and progressed in that manner. Clark's name was often in his mouth now, and his brother missionary feared that his sister's hopes of a quiet meeting were impossible indeed.

CLARK had no time for thinking. The wind snapped his mouth open, wind from the sea, and the rush of air from his descent. In his falling everything became gray, not like the mist had been, but hot. Like smoke. Then this smoke dissolved into something cold, hard, and all-absorbing, sprinkled with diamond-blue sparks. Clark had hit the water.

For an instant he was partially dazed; then it came to him that there was but one thing to do, and that his last coherent thought: not to try for land, but find a board, and cling to it. His body constricted, and, swimming clumsily, he turned, faced the open roadstead, then, with stiffened head held high, swam out and toward the reef. Kotohari, warned by the shouts above as to what had happened, was in the water, but missed him by inches. The Japanese swam to the very end of his rope, and remained there a moment, sputtering loudly, "There goes a man!" before he sought another infloating body. It was noted from that time on that Kotohari said no word more.

Clark's head had cleared, and he knew himself for what he was. Then he felt the drag of the undertow, and swam in earnest outward, that, before turning to swim to the shelf, he would have momentum behind him. It came to him that something queer had occurred; swimming was easy, and he moved rapidly outward.

The tide had changed. He should have become frightened, flurried, beat the water with wild strokes to return, for the east-Japan tides are swift running. Berserk he became. In a red haze he saw that the incoming swimmers would now be fought away from the cliff, and that the oil, ever widening, would move along and outward, taking with it, engulfing, suffocating, those already in it, and who might not escape. Every fate was against them: the *Hanaleii* on the reef, the bursted tanks, the changing tide with shore in sight—and what an ending!



"If I could only help!" he said, gulping water.

He could! He knew now that the way had been shown him. He had asked for guidance, and had been thrown into the sea. Well, here he was, and through the sea he would get to the victims in the oil-pool. He could not bring them to land, with the tide against him, but, if he went quickly, he might help them by telling of his own simple faith. That was why he had been hurled into the sea. Head low in the water, unhearing of M'Kay's shrieks—he was there now—to come ashore instantly, sir, where he belonged, and leave the rescuing to those who understood it! Unafraid, he struck out to dispossess his old enemy Death of his venom. He knew that he, himself, must die, but what of that?

Kotohari felt the change in the tide, jerked the rope, and was drawn up.

"We are done," he said, speaking for the first time. "How large was the catch?"

Five, they told him.

"That is something. Well, we can see a *seiyo-jin* funeral, for C'ark-san is gone, and can not come back."

Less easily, he added:

"He was my friend. I—I loved him. He was good to us all. What are you gaping at, cow-faces? Can not a man feel sorrow——"

He choked the rest down, and squatted silently.

"What is *he* doing?" Woodhouse asked him.

"Dying," Kotohari grunted, and spat viciously into the sea.

The news spread: villagers from other towns began to trickle up the moon-lighted path, women, even, with sleeping babies bound across their backs. All knew C'ark-san, who had helped the ill and hungry, was dying. Kotohari said so; more, Kotohari said that he was a sacrifice to the water-gods for the five who had been saved. Five for one, one like C'ark-san, that was fair, Kotohari said. They believed him.

The moon was intensely bright; all could see the bobbing head of the little missionary, the black pool toward which he headed steadily. Back, far distant, came the regular gun-like boom of a bell, and the Japanese cowered down. "He is dying," they knew: the priests were informed of it by divination, the sea was moaning it, and Kotohari was biting his lips. Through them, shortly, the most ancient Shinto priest moved, his deep eyes a-glitter, his black scarf of death over the fatal left shoulder.

He wasted no time.

"A man goes to the gods. What matter what man goes to what gods? We enter the world in the same way, all of us, and so we leave."

Behind him a priest lighted incense, and swung it high. M'Kay averted his eyes from the heathen spectacle. So Clark was prayed for by a religion old when Moses knelt on Sinai, old when the Ark was saplings.

It was no easier for the swimming missionary for all that. The first gobbets of oil touched him; in moments more he was in the pool; a gentle swell raised the oil, it blinded him, choked him. He shook it off as a dog shakes water from his pelt. Again the terrible oil-pall over him. Again, again.

"I can — go — but little — farther," he thought. "And I—see—no one——"

To give his half-seeing eyes the lie, he heard a weak cry, and, swerving the best he could, swam toward it.

"Now, heaven help me," he muttered to himself—and shipped oil with the movement of his lips—"I must disillusion this man. He thinks I bring that which will save him. I do—but not—as he—hopes. If only—I can comfort him——"

Not even by accident could he find the other swimmer: he raised his voice, calling, and received several answers.

"So there are more than one," he thought. "I wonder if any are gone. I would hate to go alone, but, with others, it is not so hard. I wonder what they will say of me at the meeting tonight? M'Kay does not like me. But he does not understand. And he will never hate me after. I wish I could find the people here."

He heard some one cry that they were saved.

"Aye!" he called. "Saved!"

"Get—us—quickly!"

"You will—be—gotten—fast enough," he called back cheerfully, and took a terrible mouthful for the word.

From the cliff came the cadence of chanting. Clark smiled.

"It is not hard to die like this," he thought, and raised his voice, comforting, hopeful. Although he could see none of them, nor they him, yet all of the swimmers floated outward together.

Clark's voice was steady, but growing weak, now and again stopped altogether. He could see nothing. His lungs ached. They ached so! Leaden. Full. They tortured him ceaselessly. But he was growing sleepy, so very sleepy, and the water was warmer. Was there anything more he should say? . . . he was so sleepy . . .

For a long moment, his head as high as he could hold it, his arms moving mechanically, he was silent, then he whispered words none could hear.

"I—can—do—no more," he gasped, after that. "Nor will I fight against the inevitable. If it were—not so—dark."

It was silver on the water, but his eyes were oil-filmed. He heard, dimly, a wild shout from the cliff, many voices raised together.

"They see me," he smiled. "I will not struggle. I will go——"

And he threw out his arms.

His hand touched wood.

"I will not—hold on. It is—some plank. It can not—help me."

Yet his fingers held to some hard thing, something round; he pulled weakly, and it held him.

The shouts from the cliff grew stronger, for the wind had died down. Clark pulled again, and found himself rising a bit from the oil-surfaced water. With a violent effort he dragged his eyes partially open with the other hand, and discovered that he was holding to the bamboo gunwale of a sampan. Of the very sampan that had thrown Kotohari and himself into the sea earlier, and had drifted southward past the headlands, and toward the reef upon which the *Hanaleii* had broken up.

He laughed joyously. And with the sound the sharp, pointed edge of some broken-off timber struck him, and he knew nothing more.

THE Noshiro mission was bright and warm: it was late that night, but, as M'Kay said firmly, meetings were meetings, and not to be put off, even if it were after eleven. He was reading from a list to five people; Woodhouse and his sister, and three other members of the dreaded board. Upon this list were the names of converts: M'Kay's led them all in numbers.

"And, lastly, we come to Brother Clark," he concluded.

They had. Clark, Kotohari's arm about him, a bandage around his head, walked unevenly in, and sat heavily, the Japanese beside him. Nor did Dr. M'Kay spare him. Clark's face was hot under the indictment.

"What do they say?" Kotohari whispered in Clark's burning ear.

"That I have failed, for I have brought few to my god."

Kotohari snorted.

"*Hai!*" he shouted, to the anger of the prim board. "What would they have? Where would I have secured courage to have swum out to that sampan, without your example? Or my two fishermen? To find you caught there, your sleeve wedged into the bamboo? In another world already, but held there for me to get?

"Could I have brought that sampan in, after collecting the other *seiyo-jin?* Against the tide? If it had not been for that very oil from the *Hanaleii* smoothing the water, could I? What do they want? Are they blind? Is this not all a god's affair? Did not our priest pour sacred bean-oil on the pine-tree, and consume it, although it is sacred also, that we might find our way safely to the cliff?

"I see the flames dancing on the waters! You led the way, where we feared going. What do they want? Would he—" thumbing at M'Kay—"would he have done it? Ho! but they are fools!"

Clark told him: it was souls, of Japanese. That was what they wanted.

"What is the matter of one extra god?" Kotohari roared, and, before Clark could raise a hand, rushed from the room.

The little missionary sat dumbly while M'Kay took up the thread again, weaving it into an entangling net. Good people at home were giving their money—oh, so generously, he could tell you!—that the work of salvation might go on. Instead, what did Clark do? What did he do? M'Kay asked them all what he did! They could not answer, nor was M'Kay able to answer his own question, as he intended.

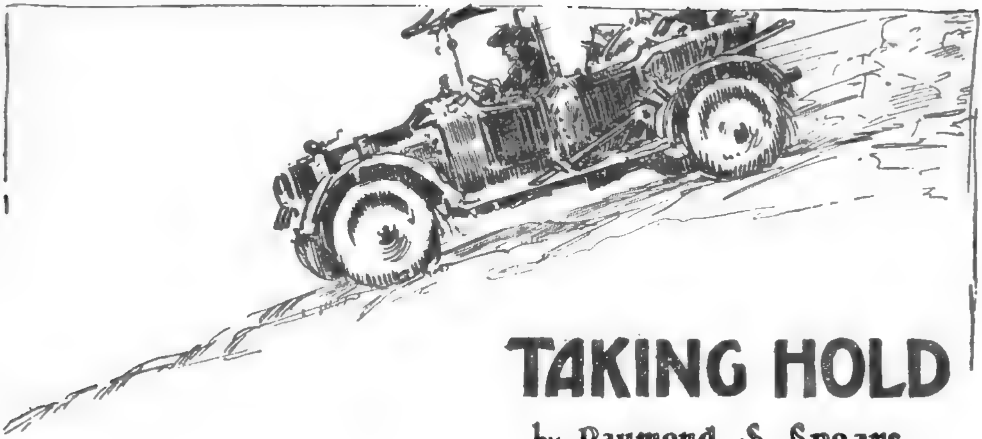
Kotohari led in the clan. Fishermen, shrimp-catchers, women with babes a-sling behind, rice-pickers who barely knew their own names, even shamefaced Matsuro, the house-boy; all crowding into the room and the hall.

"See!" Kotohari yelled. "All yours, C'ark-san. For your god. Can they ask more, those paste-faces? Count them, if you can. There are more outside, awaiting their turn. The street is filled with them. Mah! The priest himself is here. He told me to say if there are not enough he would summon all of the priests from the temple! And if *that* is not enough, we will send messengers to other villages. That one —" M'Kay—"had less than twenty. Here are ten times twenty! But remember this, C'ark-san. It is your god they want, and not theirs."

He wrinkled his nose toward the omnipotent board, unannoyed by their frowns.

A translation was made, and the ten-times-twenty added to the list. It is, however, difficult, as Miss Woodhouse bemoans, to get them to Sunday worship, now that Clark has returned to Hishiura, his own town. What she does not know—and the house-boy never told her—is that in the temple, where priests pray from dawn to dawn in threes, there is a new, paunched image, cast in bronze and gilded at Ise itself, that resembles the missionary who is the friend of every Noshiro fisherman and —for all their lack of position—every shrimp-catcher as well.

Kotohari claims that he was able to make the greatest catch ever counted, by means of offering a gold *yen* to this new god, and that he also was able—but this last may not be repeated, for Kotohari never was called upon to prove it, and it might not be true.



TAKING HOLD

by Raymond S Spears

Author of "Service Trouble at Talking Crow," "Through Fire,," etc.

AT THE Forks, beyond the Summit, Ben Tavell stopped his old Stulander car on the down-grade; for a mile the slope was straight and clean. Probably he could by force of gravity make the old bus hit on all six before reaching the bottom. Lately he hadn't stopped the motor anywhere except on down-grades. Even when he filled at gasoline stations he was obliged to state that he couldn't stop the motor because he couldn't start it again without being towed. Accordingly kindly fillers would violate the rules for his sake. Ben was a gentle, timid, friendly man in whose face and bearing were many significant wrinkles, gestures and expressions that told of long years of discouragement and failure.

Ahead of Ben loomed the vast spaces of the West. He was now some eight thousand feet above the sea-level, and somehow, standing there, he felt that he was high—and mighty. Not since he was a boy, having conquered the tasks of high school, had he felt so important. He straightened; he stiffened; he squared his shoulders, all unconsciously. Behind him he had left the ascent to and over the Continental Divide. Before him was the coasting-grade down into whatever lies in the West. Ben didn't know what was ahead for him. Certainly, he surmised, it couldn't be worse than the failures and the losses back East.

He looked under the hood of his car. He almost loved that old motor. It had dragged him from New England to mid-Rockies. In the beginning, he had found it beside the highway, abandoned. He had pried the fire-scarred ruin out of the ditch. He had coasted the wreck down to his rag shack on the creek flats. He had taken the car apart and put it together again after cleaning and scouring it. He had tightened, repaired and assembled anew all the countless pieces.

Needing a few things, he had salvaged them from junk piles at garages where service-station folk were friendly to him. He had put in a magneto instead of a generator, and without a battery he essayed to make that fire-ruin run and did. He had picked up discarded tires along the highways and built up semi-solid tires on his own wheels. He had taken as a gift an old tonneau and put it on to the chassis with picked-up bolts. What if the fire had taken the temper out of both front springs? Ben Tavell never had ridden on an easy seat in his life.

One day he rolled up to the friendly garage. In his car was stowed all his property—an old tent, a few cooking-utensils, a fine rifle, some fishing-tackle, and a battered leather Maine pack.

"Fill 'er up!" he said with an attempt at joviality.

"Where goin', Ben?" the garage man asked.

"West!" Ben replied with a courageous aspect that belied his sinking heart.

"What—touring in that po'r old wreck of a Stulander!" the mechanic demanded in wonder. "Well, I'll be—say!—tickled to death if you'll drop me a card, telling me how you're getting along. Tell you what I'll do—um-m— Make you a present of this gas and— Well, wait a minute!"

He went into the machine shop. He returned with a dozen tools in his hand. These were wrenches with battered jaws, a hand-drill with the shoulder brace gone, a hack-saw frame, with some new blades, a machine hammer with a broken handle—all tools discarded as wasteful for an up-to-date garageman's use, but to Ben, who had worked with a hatchet, a piece of chain and a bar of iron and other makeshifts for tools, that gift was beyond price. He couldn't speak for gratitude to this Jim Maltby, who grinned sheepishly at the spectacle of a man thankful beyond expression.

With those old, worn-out tools Ben Tavell had eased his old car into the Mohawk Trail, through the Hudson Valley and up into the miles on miles of levels into Buffalo, across Ohio, Indiana, Illinois—by which time he could work his car up the grades of Iowa and over the Missouri River ridges into the slow ascent up the river Platte.

He had bought gasoline. His feelings when he found it selling for eleven cents instead of nineteen to twenty-four, need not be dwelt on. The worst seemed over when he had passed the first two thousand miles. In fact, he found the climb to the Continental Divide crest the final drag on all his reserves of ingenuity, endurance and hope. But here on the right-hand side was an enameled sign on a galvanized pipe standard—the summit-marker! He had made the grade, the last mile walking beside the car and steering it from the running-board while he gave the machine a push now and then to help it along.

He laughed at the mile of grade he could see ahead. He did not know that the miles beyond were all down. He laughed aloud in a kind of jubilant hysteria. This had been the worst. He knew the trouble at last. He crawled under to tighten up the clutch-plates. He might have saved a lot of walking, much worry and some gasoline if he had known in time how simple the repair would be—if he had just been inspired to do that little trick.

All cool, he gave the old bus a push, jumped in and coasted down—for miles. Surely, God is good! Anyhow the West was there beckoning. He paused at the forks. Ahead was the Lincoln Highway, and to the left was the Ben Franklin Trail. He didn't know anything about either one. On the strength of his own name being Ben he took the left-hand turn.

The road was a bit bumpy. Sand almost filled the ruts in spots. Looking ahead, Ben could see only rolling lands with reddish to dark-red masses of earth or stone or breadths of flat, on a scale so liberal in its expanse that the tourist caught his breath in awe and delight. Across the land in a narrowing line the four-rod-wide roadway extended so far that it disappeared like a needle point on the dark green of a stretching slope—and Ben knew that slope was like the one he now stood on, covered with bushes, sage, two or three feet in height. He wondered if he could cross that unimaginable perspective of distance?

He could see no sign of human habitation, but after a few hours he saw a ruin beside the highway, stone walls, a tumbled-in roof, and against a bluff bank, the wetness of water. He stopped his car. He went over to drink, for he was athirst. Then he would fill the radiator.

But as he pressed his way through the weeds of what had been a plowed-up and much-hoed garden, he heard a whirring clatter at his feet. He had heard of that sound, like the whizz of a huge locust, back East on a hot Summer day. Sure enough, athwart his path stood a rattlesnake, head and tail up, giving warning with a thin, mirthless grin on its face.

Ben Tavell did not move. He was just within range, as he recognized. He marshaled his forces and jumped back. He walked out around, and on his way to the spring he saw five other rattlesnakes. The abandoned homestead was now the gathering-place of poisonous serpents and owls. The tourist felt much like an intruder; and, having filled his radiator and a pail with a cover on it, he went on his way.

The Ben Franklin Trail was not all in good condition, even at the beginning. On beyond it was worse. He arrived at last at a strip where the roadway consisted of two deep ruts in the sage-brush prairie. He felt the pathway of his hopes petering out. Without realizing it, he grew less and less cheery, less and less buoyant, till he asked himself if this trail was not just vanishing under his wheels, and might not at last disappear entirely. He could not believe that this was the famous road of which he had heard enthusiastic travelers speak!

When night fell, he was nowhere. He pulled out beside the shallow ruts—apparently little traversed!—and spread down his canvas, his old blankets and his clothes-bag for a pillow. His bed was level gravel, without a trace of vegetation for an acre round about. Certainly no serpent would come across that barren to seek his warm company!

AT DAWN, with strength, courage and buoyant hope, awakened him. With sticks of wood and a few pieces of cut-up cord-tires he built a fire in a sheet-iron box. He cooked flapjacks and fried a jack-rabbit. He ate with gusto. He went over his car with a wrench and then resumed his rolling, still to the West.

In the afternoon he ate another meal. That night he slept on an alkali flat beside an ooze of water which was bitter, but wet. In the morning he went on again, after emptying a five-gallon oil-can into his gas-tank. He saw scattering cattle. He saw, off to right or left, every twenty or thirty miles, some toy-like building. He came to the brink of a world of which he had never dreamed, and looked down into a city so far away that it seemed to be but a few tiny boxes, set symmetrically in the bottom of a vast basin, across which curled and meandered a river-bed in which there was only a faint trickle of water—water flowing out of that bitter creek of which he had drank the day before, or the day before that, he wasn't sure just when.

He started down a road cut out of sheer bluffs and slopes so steep that a stone tossed out fell a hundred yards straight down. He was easing himself down pitches and slopes and side-tilting ruts when behind him with terrific suddenness sounded the blast of a hoarse, loud, growling horn of an automobile. He started at that assault on his ears. He had been so busy keeping in the ruts and going around the curves and hairpin turns that he had not been conscious of jeopardy. Now he wondered how in the name of Heaven he could let that great, shining and impatient car get by him. As he tried to plan, the horn tooted again and again continuously. A loud human voice added its curses to the demand.

He glanced back. He saw a wide-shouldered, burly-faced, immensely hatted man with thin lips and bare chin snarling with indignant haste. Ben Tavell started to pull out to one side, but pulled back again as the front wheels approached the brink of doom. He started to pull out to the other side, and behind him urged—

"Your own side, there, blame you!"

Tavell shrank along. He shivered with nervous apprehension. He fairly felt the thrust of the huge car behind him.

"Hurry up!" the stranger yelled, but Tavell couldn't hurry.

Tavell kept to the ruts far down that terrific slope. He ran past three or four gorges in the side of the cliffs, not knowing that they were turn-out places. He at last, on the talus slope at the foot of the incline, managed to pull clear; and the new, beautiful automobile roared past with open cut-out, and the single occupant shouting curses and threats over his shoulder.

The dust of the passer-by settled over Tavell's outfit in a cloud. He stopped his car to have grateful rest, an hour of ease and breathing. He looked ahead to the city in the valley flat. He saw the passer's cloud of dust approach the town, and it seemed to be but the stirring of an insect, more and more tiny and trifling till at last only the dust could be seen. This went into the toy town.

Beyond the foot of the hill a mile or two was a large sign which read:

AUTO PARK!
Stop in Coleton!
Free Water—Shade!
Stay A
WHILE!

Tavell sighed with relief. His loneliness was great. His hopes faded as the weariness toward the days' ends increased. Now he kept on going, and he found the auto park as described. Seven great cottonwood-trees, a hydrant with a faucet, an expanse of bare earth and five or six fireplaces with old tires, juniper roots and other inflammable materials for fuel. Tavell noticed a man alone at the entrance to the place, but thought nothing of that. He rolled up to turn in, but the man with the swift, smooth action of a striking rattlesnake pulled a short-barreled six-shot .45 revolver and said sharply—

"I want you!"

Tavell gasped his amazement. What

crime had he committed? The captor, with a star now disclosed, made no explanation. He came up into the seat beside the driver and, prodding with the muzzle in the ribs, directed the way to the city judge's court.

"Remanded till mornin'!" the wizened justice said, and Tavell was taken around to the jail, a stone pen with steel-barred, foot-square windows high up in the walls. The place was vile, but the prisoner had an old keg to sit on all night long, while he wondered what he had done to deserve this thing?

In the morning he was summoned forth. He was faint with weariness. His eyes blurred in the cloudless sunshine. He drank the raw coffee and ate a plateful of beans handed to him with an irresistible appetite. He stumbled as he went into the shadows of the court-room, a big room, finished in natural wood, with tall narrow windows and an odor of fresh paint and varnish. Smiling genially, leaning back in a great arm-chair, was the old boy of the great car, fat, his abdomen protruding and one corner of his grinning lips lifting confidently.

"That's him, the son of a gun!" the old boy nodded, approving.

"You charge 'im with blocking and obstructing the highway an' refusing to make way f'r a fellow automobilist?" the judge inquired.

"Yes, sir; that's it exactly."

"Well, Sheriff Kessler, I anticipate 'at there's one road hog won't do it again," the judge beamed. "Got a right to have a lawyer, prisoner; an' yo' kin demand a jury trial in consequence, if you think it's a good idee. What say?"

Tavell looked at the city marshal, at the complainant, at the judge. He felt, rather than saw, the eight or ten spectators on the benches behind him in the court-room. From these spectators and others like them the jury would be chosen. Long ago when he was a youth, he had seen courts in action.

"I didn't mean to trouble anybody!" he said in a low voice. " 'Course, I couldn't get out of the way on that mountain——"

"Huh!" the judge snapped. "You plead guilty then, don't you?"

"Make it so then," Tavell replied, sick at heart.

"A hundred dollars fine er fifty days in jail!" the judge snapped.

"I'm broke."

Tavell shook his head, reaching out less than three dollars in silver for them all to see.

"Well, yo' got an automobill, ain't you?" the judge inquired sarcastically.

"Oh!" Tavell gasped.

The old bus wasn't much. It had seen all of its best days. It was worn, unkempt and decrepit. At the same time Tavell had come to regard it as a fellow being, his companion, his friend, and he had tolerated all the faults with an increasing affection and understanding.

"Well, all right," Tavell said with sudden stiffening of his fiber.

"Bill o' sale—then! Court accepts car instead of cash in hand!" the judge grinned with pleased malice.

A bystander, who proved to be the clerk, drafted a bill of sale, elaborate, ornate and wordy. Tavell signed, and the judge grinned:

"O. K.—you c'n go now!"

Tavell turned down the aisle of the court, through the gateway in the sticky railing. He went outside and looked back toward the tourist camp and its twenty-five-foot sign of "Welcome, Stranger." He crossed the street to the plaza or square and sat down on a bench. The faithful old bus was standing beside a cottonwood-tree with a twenty-foot chain padlocked through wheels and around the tree. Apparently no one had touched the contents. The marshal, coming out, glanced across at the victim of their highway justice. His eyes fluttered a moment, and then he reached in and dragged out the old Maine pack, to heave it toward the observer.

"Here!" the marshal yelped, veiling the kindliness of his intention. "Take yer stuff!"

Tavell picked up the pack, the bag containing the tools and a pair of blankets and returned to the bench. The marshal sprang into the seat, accompanied by the complainant sheriff.

A step on the starter brought no whirr or rumble from the motor. The marshal looked under the deck and cursed the absence of a battery. He went out to the crank, and snapped the fly-wheel over. Spectators gathered and began to offer volumes of advice.

The two, marshal and sheriff grew uncomfortable, felt a loss of importance and finally became indignant. The increasing crowd began to laugh and whoop, finally to cheer.

The sheriff, looking around, saw Tavell on the bench across the street, comfortable in the shade of a cottonwood. He started up in wrath. He turned to shout at Tavell:

"Hey, you! C'me here! Start this blamed bus of yourn!"

"It isn't mine," Tavell replied quietly. "You took it away from me."

The whoops and laughter of the crowd ceased instantly. The bystanders listened intently to catch the least word said, now. Sheriff Kessler ignored the sudden shift in sentiment.

"I tell you, come here!"

Tavell shook his head. In his spirit something stirred. He did not realize the turn of affairs. He merely knew that he had been imposed on and that now he was being bullied—and this in the West, where if a man's a man, he's an independent prince of the earth.

"When you need a chauffe'r, you have to hire him," Tavell retorted, and the crowd stood on its tiptoes.

Sheriff Kessler stormed down from his seat on the old automobile and started across the street. Half-way over, one strong voice came from the crowd—

"Hold on, sheriff—play fair!"

That was all. Kessler's mountainous flesh bore him on two or three steps. He came to a stop. Tavell was standing, waiting and ready.

"Start that car—I hire you!" Kessler changed his tune.

Tavell sauntered across to the car. He was himself in a predicament, but he refused to show it. He said, instead, to the one man who had voiced the crowd's sentiment—

"I'll have to have a push."

Then the crowd whooped and gathered around the old bus, and when he let in the gears all hands were rolling the car along. The motor sputtered, exploded, resisted, and then rattled and banged of its own power. With a yell the crowd rejoiced. Leaving the machine running, Tavell reached down and carried away his rifle and an Army belt full of ammunition. No one said a word to him. The marshal drove the car down the street toward a garage, and Ben Tavell, shouldering his pack, headed up the street toward the rimrocks miles distant toward the West.

No one said anything more to him. He did not see that many friendly glances were directed after him. He kept on out of town, on foot. He strode easily under his considerable pack. He had felt dismayed, and for a time crushed by the thing he had endured. Now somehow he felt like a bigger, better man.

The feel of his carbine was pretty in his hand. The pack contained his riches, the old tools and some other odds and ends. His car was gone. He had, however, thick sole-leather and sturdy limbs.

As he swung, a cheeriness burst through him like an explosion. He was merry. He began to whistle as he went on toward the bluffs that encircled the city valley, and up which he could see the line that indicated the ascent of the Ben Franklin Highway.

When he started it was ten o'clock. Just after six o'clock that evening he arrived at the foot of the enormous cliffs. He saw on a post beside the highway a tin can. Beneath the can was a two-foot slab of board from a box which had held tomato cans. On the board was scrawled in pencil:

Water.

Just around the curve of talus slope was a hole two feet deep and three feet across, full of water. At this basin Ben Tavell drank deeply, and a little later in the starlight he swabbed down despite the stinging frost of that altitude. He rolled up in his blankets and slept at peace. What if in the night the chill penetrated to his back? He curled up and added his breath to the available warmth. At false dawn he sprang to his feet, flapping his arms around him—and crowing like a rooster!

HE TOOK note of his surroundings. He drank plenty of water, having nothing else with which to fill his stomach. He started up the bluffs in the second dawn and found beside the road-ruts a water-bag. It had become untied from some passer-by's car. He looked at it, carried it back to the spring to fill it, and went his way rejoicing.

Who, with a gallon of water, is afraid of a red desert? Not Ben Tavell, he laughed to himself. Courage had replaced his despair.

Up yonder on a great plateau he saw a land brimmed by blue, far mountain-ranges. He saw only sage and levels of gravel and alkali clays. He felt the expansion of chest that comes when a man feels room enough to stretch his arms. Hungry, of course, but with water to sip sparingly, Tavell looked about for some of that opportunity which he understood was out here. For hours he strained his eyes to see it. Then he saw a wheel-trace turning off to the right, leaving the main road.

Three or four days before he had dreaded the possibility of reaching the end, the jumping-off place of the Ben Franklin Trail. Now he couldn't reach the end of roads quickly enough. He took the trace to the right. He left behind him the plain ruts to follow indistinct, dust-drifted, scratch-gravel wheel-marks, and they led him to the end which he sought now with eager determination.

Surely the end was plain enough. Ben Tavell arrived in the twilight of the second day out from the bluff-foot spring. Here in a valley beyond a sunken rimrock jump-down, was a board hut with a fence around an abandoned alfalfa-field. Just beyond the hut was a great slope, up which grew juniper-cedars, some of them in almost a canopied forest.

On the wall of the hut was a doggerel:

I come to find a happy home,
I found this desolation;
Now I go right far to roam,
To find some consolation.

Ben Tavell found a chair, a home-made table, some broken dishes, an old stove, a weed-filled bunk and other furniture. He had been a squatter on other people's land. He now felt that he had discovered a land of his own—not a mere quarter-section, nor yet an arid-land grazing-claim, but a valley of a thousand colors and a basin of vast domain. Water trickling down out of a spring on the wooded hill was of first importance. Enormous jack-rabbits devastating the alfalfa were food. On the shelves were cans with salt, pepper, and even a chunk of tinned bacon, which was almost as hard as petrified mammoth.

Before dark he was skinning two jack-rabbits, and just after dawn, when he looked forth from his shack, he saw a high-stepping white-tail buck, holding up his head after nibbling a tall spray of the green fodder. With one perfect shot the venison was added to the jack-rabbit.

Tavell could hardly believe his change of fortune. Surely that fine buck hung on a gambrel in the shed must be a dream! What more could a man ask than good water, plenty of fine meat, shelter and room to expand? More than this, he found on one shelf a hundred pounds of papers, magazines, thumbed, old books and a lot of announcements, notices, advertisements and catalogs. The luxury of reading at his leisure had never been Tavell's good fortune. He now read till he went to sleep.

He was tired. The struggle of more than a score of years as boy, youth and man had tried him much. He could relax, recline and rest now. How often he had started up and pressed on when he wanted to turn over and snatch another hour's sleep! He took all those hour's sleep that he had wanted. Well-rested, he walked up the mountain to the junipers, and looked back down into the valley which he had occupied.

He was on the lookout when he saw an automobile coming in on the old wagon-trace. When the machine rocked and exploded up to his hut he was ready to greet the visitors. Five men were in the tonneau. They were broad-hatted to a head. One, at the wheel, sported a shield on his shirt.

"Why, howdy, Tavell!" this man grinned. "Settled here?"

"Yes, sir," Tavell replied, wondering how the stranger knew his name.

"We wondered where you went to," the man continued. "—— lonesome place through here. Say, seen any strangers going through thisaway?"

"Haven't seen any one since I left Coleton a month ago." Tavell shook his head. "Why?"

"Three men romped into Coleton yesterday noon, shot —— out of us, grabbed the cash drawer and safe stuff in the bank—and romped away again."

"On horses?"

"Nope. Came in a flivver and left in the sheriff's big beauty—you know it!"

"Yes, boys, I remember it."

"Well, they come out the road, up over the bluffs, and over into White Lynx Buttes. Rolled the car down the slope and took to their horses."

"And they headed?"

"West, bearing north. Naturally they'd hit through here. Must have passed this way. They had a load of gold and silver, and some green-backs—paper, you know, and bonds. Have seventy or eighty thousand, all told. We just found this morning how they worked their getaway. Haven't seen any one?"

"No one." Tavell shook his head.

"Let us have horses——"

"I haven't any horses." Tavell shook his head.

"That's right!"

The deputy sheriff looked around, shaking his head and adding—

"Well, how the—— do you get out of here—walk?"

"I don't go out." Tavell shook his head. "I just stay here—at home."

The word "home" lingered on his lips. He had never used it for himself before. At this moment it was sweet and full of meaning. Not one of the listeners but caught the tenderness of his expression. They knew him, recognized his condition, felt his position better than he himself could realize.

"All right, old boy!" the deputy said. "My name's Vic Haines. There's five thousand reward on those three—two thousand on the leader and fifteen hundred on the other two. And ten per cent. if you bring in the money—on what you bring in."

Tavell made no comment. He suggested dinner, and the men sat up to broiled venison steaks and cold water. They knew, but did not comment to their host, on the meagerness of that diet. They rolled away, and when they were gone Tavell found five silver dollars tucked under broken plates and battered tin cups.

His hand trembled as he realized the largesse in that bounty. These men had laughed at him when he was fined his automobile. Now they had found him sitting pretty, if in privation, in the county that had given him that gruff reception.

He had now eight dollars and eighty-seven cents. He began to think about going, to Coleton to buy supplies, flour and bacon, perhaps coffee and sugar—simple relishes to go with the venison that he had for a staple. He snared jack-rabbits with hay-tie wire, rather than waste precious .30-.30 cartridges on such small game.

He climbed the juniper-range behind his cabin. He went down the other side. He found tracks of three horses heading away toward the west of north, straight and long-striding. He looked along the trail in both directions. He could see for miles.

He strolled to the right, toward Coleton and found where the horsemen had stopped. He looked around; and, sure enough, here were faint scratches in the dust on the rocks and stones. In their hurry, passing by in the starlight, the bandits had found the weight of gold too heavy for them to carry without wearing down their horses and they had cached the gold and silver.

In an hour Tavell found the metal, a hundred pounds of it, buried loosely beneath cunningly scattered stones that had in their design the letter "H," probably for "Here." He counted the coins. Here were hundreds of double and single eagles, as well as many silver dollars. All told, he had twenty-six thousand, six hundred and twenty-eight dollars. He stared at the loot, and then over his shoulder at the ridge to the southward, and back along the plain toward where the robbers had left the automobile for their horses.

Carefully he gathered up the coins. He slung them in his stout woolen shirt and then covered over the cache, brushing out his own careless foot-prints. He arrived back at his cabin after dark. Another day would pass before the pursuers could arrive on that trail on brought-up horses.

That night it rained. A storm broke upon the plains and the mountains, coming down in gray deluges of crashing masses. That pouring storm had covered all the desert sage with its smothering, changing wash. Neither bandits nor sheriffs nor any other man need ever know that Ben Tavell had found the thieves' loot!

He was human. He was not suspected. He had only to keep it hidden, biding his time. He could live there a year or two. He could at last slip away to some distant region and make his real home.

But this was his real home! He looked at the five silver dollars left by the deputy sheriff's posse. These showed the good will of the humans. He pitched and tossed in his dilemma. He could not sleep. At dawn the sunrise determined him.

He shouldered his rifle; and, carrying his pack, he cut across to the eastward, a bit south, and came to the brim looking down into Coleton. He started down the craggy slope into the basin. Part-way down, he saw, over to the right, an automobile hung upon a jutting rock. He scrambled across to it.

Sheriff Kessler's car! The bandits had tossed it down that ledge when they took to their horses. Tavell looked up, and he looked down. He found the car so nicely balanced that he could move it, teetering, with one hand. It had rolled over and over several times, and looked to be an utter wreck.

"Too bad—a fine car!"

Tavell shook his head as he went on down a quarter-mile to the level basin flats.

HE ARRIVED in Coleton the following morning. He went straight to the sheriff's office. Kessler looked up with a scowl. The president of the bank was sitting across the desk, hard-faced and indignant.

"I'm telling you, sheriff!" the banker declared, rising to his feet.

"I beg pardon!"

Tavell turned from one to the other.

"I crossed the range day before yesterday to the north side. I found three horse-tracks, heading west——"

"Oh, we know that!" Kessler exclaimed impatiently. "We cut in on them tracks forty mile beyond Fool's Hollow, where you're located."

"Excuse me, sheriff!" Tavell said sharply. "I haven't told you all there was to it. Deputy Sheriff Vic Haines came in and told me about it—said they were loaded with gold. I'd packed a load of tools, remember, out of Coleton—on my own back. They're cached out by the spring, on the West Road. Well, I followed those horse-tracks back, and I've come in to tell you I found their cache of gold and some silver, twenty-six thousand six hundred and twenty-eight dollars—dead weight!"

"What!" the two listeners cried in a breath.

"Yes, sir."

In the banker's car they rolled out on the road to the dim wagon-fork; now dimmer than ever after the passing cloudburst. They went into Fool's Hollow, and Tavell dragged out the money, now in an old burlap bag, to hand it to the banker through the sheriff. They rolled away with every dollar of it, with hardly as much as a thank-you to the man who had recovered it.

Tavell watched them go glumly. He had forgotten even to bring out the supplies his stomach craved. So that was the way they treated him! He felt as if he was the prime fool of Fool's Hollow for not keeping the money—ingrates that the authorities and banker were!

A—— of a country! Tavell felt ready to quit anyhow. He would have started immediately, only he was hungry and tired. The venison tasted only too familiar, but the bunk gave him a fine sleep. In the morning under the red sun and golden light he felt surprized to think that he had considered leaving it.

He started once more for Coleton to buy supplies. He cut down to the Ben Franklin trail, and within an hour after striking it a car came up behind him from the west, and the cheery voice of Deputy Sheriff Vic Haines bade him take a ride.

"Huh, Tavell!" Haines said. "Hear you picked up the coin, eh? Fine! They slipped us, away over beyond Tickle Throat Flats, scattering, and the rain washed out their hoof-prints."

In town Tavell would have left the car at the General Mercantile establishment, but Haines took him on to the sheriff's office in the county court-house.

"Mornin', Tavell!" the sheriff greeted. "Here's your warrant for the reward—sign the receipt—here! See, two thousand, six-sixty-two and eighty cents—that right?"

"Right! Right!"

Tavell stared at the slips in his hand.

Gruff old boy that he was, Kessler would play square—now. Tavell was a citizen of Bitterwater County, and known for a square man.

Tavell signed the receipt and over at the bank drew the cash in yellow and green currency. For a time he stood staring at it, and then deposited all but the odd dollars and cents. He went across to the store and bought a back-load of things to eat. He looked at the big sign of a small café on the square with a feeling of unutterable longing. He was hungry! The habit of years of penury and poverty held him in check, and then he remembered with a rush that he was rich! He had money in the bank! He had a pocket full of silver!

He fairly ran over to the café, and when the round-cheeked, blue-eyed, smiling waitress came to him with a glass of water, knife, fork, two spoons and a paper napkin, he pointed at the upper half of the bill of fare and whispered.

"Bring me all that, will you?" he pleaded. "See—I have the price."

Accordingly she served him three dollars and eighty-five cents' worth from soup to pudding—regular dinner, all the dishes—and when he had eaten, he added half an apple pie to what extravagances he had had before. He walked out at last, his shoulders back, his head up, and picking his teeth like a county power behind the political throne—west of the Continental Divide.

"Hey!" he heard a voice over at the court-house steps. "*Hi-i-i!* Auction sale today-y! Two automobiles, as is! First we have a machine proved in worth by its long service on the Transcontinental Trails! Full-l title given! Sold as is—cash on the spot, buyer to remove from the county premises. County property-y!"

Ben Tavell looked. He saw his old car, hauled by a team of mules, brought to the court-house steps. He saw Hon. "Wishbone" Franks, attorney, auctioneering the car. Bystanders were joined by a hundred others who came to see and hear the excitement.

Tavell strolled across, too. All bitterness was gone from his heart. Only affection remained for the old machine, and understanding for the hard-bitten, scurrying, self-sufficient men of that grim land. He felt himself to be one of them. He stood by, and felt the interest the crowd was taking in him as well as in the car.

Vic Haines started the bidding at ten cents. No one else bid. The crowd began to jeer Vic, who showed signs of alarm lest he be saddled with that old bus and obliged to pay somebody five dollars to drag it out to the junk dump.

Somebody bid eleven cents; the bidding became spirited around eighteen and twenty cents. At twenty-three cents, reached by long and laggard stages, Tavell raised them all.

"Thirty cents!" he shouted, and the auctioneer, hearing the voice, gave one glance at its source, and then with frantic eagerness, concern and a snap, as if he feared the bidder might withdraw his offer, he shouted—

"*Gone!*"

The crowd turned and recognized Ben Tavell. With a great yell they crowded around him, congratulating him on his purchase. Had he bid in a five thousand dollar race-horse he could not have heard more praise for his good fortune.

He started for the old machine, filled with real emotion as he realized that now every one of these men was his friend, the attorney for the county interrupted:

"Now, gentlemen, I cease acting for the county and become the attorney and auctioneer in behalf of the sheriff and his department. I offer for sale to the highest bidder, his splendid automobile, sixty horse-power, rating, and eighty-five horse-power, actual. This machine, as you all know, cost three thousand, two hundred forty-seven dollars and eighty-eight cents, delivered freight-paid at the railroad station, and no better automobile ever traversed the magnificent boulevards and the splendid courses of Bitterwater County. What am I offered for it as it lies?"

He gestured toward the cliffs, more than twenty miles distant. He waited a minute, and then some one said—

"Ten dollars."

Others made tentative, reluctant offers, and the amount went to twenty-five dollars. Tavell looked across the flats a moment.

"Thirty dollars!" he said.

No one went any higher, and Tavell took the bill of sale, signing the receipt.

He paid the owner of the team of mules two dollars to start his old automobile. He let in the clutch, and after a minute or two the motor barked and coughed. Soon it settled to a noisy refrain, and the city marshal made a laugh when he shouted humorously—

"Close that blamed cut-out, Ben!"

Tavell waved his hand as he headed out toward the point where he could see after a time the dark shape of the suspended car. After a shake-bone trip he stopped at the foot of the slope. He clambered up to look his property over. He took his old kit of tools up to the balanced machine, and by sunset he was well at work.

That night he camped at the foot of the bluffs, and all the following day he eased pieces and parts of the big car down to the levels. With two of those Army tow-lines the truck boys "over there" knew so well, and which he carried in the old car, he let the chassis itself slip down, snubbing on knobs of rock in places.

He took the old tonneau off his old car and put it on the new one in place of the one that had been destroyed, coming end over end down the mountain slope. When he had everything assembled he held his breath while he stepped on the starter.

Snap went the motor, and subsided into a low, almost inaudible purr. Tavell loaded his old machine in parts upon his new car, not being afraid of marring that old tonneau. He started for town but, thinking better of it, swung around into the Ben Franklin Trail and rolled swiftly up the great cutbank trail into the plateau above. He went on at thirty miles an hour and turned off toward what was called Fool's Hollow.

There he ran up to the hut, which was standing firm and beautiful in the rose-red rays of the setting sun. He stopped in the yard, half a mile distant, and looked around at this, his home. He saw the slope of a vast ridge, covered with junipers in the background. To the right, the east, he saw a toy town away yonder—Coleton! To the west were vistas and sceneries and visions of mirage where he could, if he wished, jump off when he felt scrooged and crowded up. Behind him away back and below, beyond a ridge, was the unspeakably fascinating double-rut roadway across a few thousand square miles of sage and wonderful land in between the shrubs.

"Good Lord!" Ben Tavell whispered doubtfully, and then as he stared, hardly able to believe what Fate at last had rendered to him, that hut—that expanse of wide acreage, he said again, "Good Lord!"

STORMALONG

by Harold Willard Gleason

WHEN the fog drifts gray through the narrow street,
I hear in the night the sound of feet
Crunching the pebbles, clumping the stones,
And the salt sea-breeze from the harbor moans,
"Here comes Stormalong, home from the sea,
"Him that was drowned in '53."

Old men know and relate the tale
Of Stormalong and the no'theast gale
That shattered his main-mast, driving home
In a welter of sleet and frozen foam;
How his gray beard streamed and his eyes snapped fire
At a crew long cold and beyond his ire;
How he steered the *Sally* with hand of steel
And soul unflinching, lashed to the wheel,
With the black waves breaking above his head,
And brought her into the harbor—dead.

And my heart beats fast when the fog sweeps in
And the dull bells clang and the hoarse horns din,
For I hear a step on the narrow street,
And I listen rapt for the fantom feet
Of Cap'n Stormalong, home from the sea,
Him that was drowned in '53.

A Complete Novelette

LOOSE LOOT

by Frederick J Jackson

Author of "Cassidy Troubles Trouble," "Scars of Conceit," etc.

IN THE lee of Frankland Island, on the Queensland coast, two schooners lay at anchor. Two hundred yards separated them, and "Blacky" Brown, master of the *Essen*, yearned fervently for the chance to snatch up the Winchester which lay at his feet and draw a fine bead on Buck Jansen, master of the *Cowrie*. The *Cowrie* was there for minor repairs. Captain Brown was there for revenge, but there were two reasons for his not taking it. One was that Buck Jansen did not appear on the *Cowrie's* deck; the other was that Jansen's crew consisted of seven white men, seven men who now carried automatic pistols and in addition kept Winchesters within easy reach as they worked.

Captain Brown looked like his reputation—evil and dark. His close-set eyes were black, his eye-brows formed a heavy black line across his face, with no gap above the nose. His black beard, crudely trimmed by his own hand, added to his sinister appearance. His voice was a harsh, savage bellow. His crew of natives whimpered when he even looked at them—and they were a crew of murderous fighters. Any thing from blackbirding to near piracy was his manner of adding to his store of the root of evil.

The year before, Buck Jansen had inconveniently sailed into a lagoon and caught Captain Brown in the act of giving doped liquor to the crowd of natives on the *Essen's* deck. Each of these Kanakas represented a potential two hundred dollars to Captain Brown when delivered to a certain plantation, but Buck Jansen frowned on blackbirding. He had obtained the drop on Brown, taken the natives ashore and then turned Brown's schooner adrift on the high seas. Furthermore, it had pleased Jansen's whimsical sense of humor to maroon Brown on the very island from which he had attempted to kidnap the natives. And Brown had no legal way of obtaining redress, for he could not come into a court with clean hands. But Brown did not want legal revenge; he wanted a direct one. Therefore his desire to ventilate with a bullet some part of Jansen's body.

Now Buck Jensen, in his way, was also notorious—the cool, smiling young master of all the Pacific adventurers. Most people liked him; and through this liking he had been enabled to pick up valuable and profitable cargoes in his capacity as a trader. But trading all the time was too tame for Jansen's blood. He was honest—except in one thing, namely, his refusal to take seriously the property rights claimed by any government in any pearl lagoon. The only thing he took seriously was a gunboat on the horizon, but he had fooled many of them.

Blacky Brown scowled malevolently across at the *Cowrie*. For eight months he had hoped to "meet up" with Buck Jansen, and now that he had by sheer chance found him, he realized that he was no better off. The *Cowrie,* as Brown knew, three months before, had sailed from Sydney. But she was still riding high in the water; obviously her hold held no cargo. Therefore, reasoned Brown, the *Cowrie* had been pearling. The thought of killing Buck Jansen and then looting his schooner was a particularly enticing one.

But times had changed; the authorities had become irritatingly investigative. No more could a man fight out a feud whereever he chanced to meet with his enemy. The open sea, preferably scores of miles from any land, was the safest place in which a private war could now be fought to a bloody finish. Otherwise the survivor was in danger of facing the steel doors which open only one way. But there were no witnesses on this isolated part of the coast. A man could take a chance.

Jansen must have been warned that some one was out to get him. Thus reasoned Brown. If he hadn't been warned, why the seven white men in his crew? In the past, Jansen's crew invariably had been composed of two white men and five natives. Through binoculars, Brown again examined the *Cowrie.* Again he counted the white men in sight, every one with a heavy automatic at his hip. He grinned sourly as he recognized "Fox" Clark. Clark was a thin man with a perpetually hungry look. His blond mustache was always stained with tobacco. His furtive glances toward the *Essen* held a grin that was a nasty sneer. The powerful glasses brought these details to Brown's eyes.

"Fox Clark!" cogitated Brown. "If he's a sample of what Jansen has signed on—I dunno—I dunno."

Brown shook his head. Clark was keen-brained, of the quick, nervous type. He could think and shoot with equal facility.

Blacky Brown thought it over a while, and then decided to wait, for his crew of twelve cannibals would be outclassed. In a hand-to-hand scrimmage they were deadly, but when it came to accurate shooting there was only one of them with sufficient intelligence to understand the real purpose of a rear sight. If Jansen were foolish enough to remain at his anchorage until darkness, Brown intended dropping two boats, boarding the *Cowrie* simultaneously at bow and stern with all his cannibals and taking a chance on being able to wipe out the *Cowrie's* crew. His own savage crew, in the darkness, would have the advantage.

After that! Brown licked his thick lips. He would loot the *Cowrie* and then sink her. It would be safe, for he would leave no witnesses or evidence behind.

So engrossed was Blacky Brown with watching the *Cowrie* and planning the night's work that he failed at first to see a small canoe that had out put from shore. It rounded the *Essen's* stern and stopped just below Brown, not fifteen feet away. Two natives were at the paddles. The third person in the craft was a girl, but at first glance would be taken for a man. A battered slouch hat was pulled down on her forehead. Her clothing was khaki. Coat, breeches and leggings were torn and dusty, faded and stained. Her heavy shoes were ripped, scratched, battered-looking. Her hands were covered with half-healed scratches and wounds. She was perhaps twenty-five years old.

Only the delicateness of her features beneath a heavy coat of tan told that she was a woman. She sat in the stern of the canoe. One hand, hanging low between her knees, held a .45 Colt automatic. The big weapon looked out of place in her small hand.

All this Blacky Brown noticed. Idly he wondered what she was doing there, and how much control she would have over the "kick-up" of the gun if she ever fired it.

For perhaps ten seconds, the paddlers holding the canoe motionless, she studied Captain Brown. Involuntarily then she glanced shoreward, studied the deserted coast, apprehension in her gaze.

"Where is your schooner. going from here?" she inquired at last.

Blacky Brown squirted tobacco-juice at the bow of the canoe.

"Are you the port collector?" he inquired humorously.

"I'm not!" she snapped. "And I'm not the Emperor of Japan or the Queen of Sheba. I asked you a civil question."

"Where I'm bound for?" repeated Blacky, his gaze riveted on two saddle-bags in the bottom of the canoe. The bags were large, made of kangaroo-hide with the hair on the outside. "It all depends," he continued. "Maybe Sydney, maybe Suva, maybe Levuka—and then again I may lay a course for somewhere else. I'm a trader," he added, suddenly noting that her clear blue eyes radiated self-reliance and unusual intelligence.

The thought had struck him that she might prove to be an embarrassing witness of the murderous program he had planned for the night to come.

"I'll pay you to take me away from here," she offered.

"Well, come aboard. If you can pay enough, I'll take you to Brisbane." Already he had decided to lock her in the spare stateroom after she had retired. This would prevent her from seeing or hearing anything that happened on the *Cowrie*, which lay to the starboard of the *Essen*. The spare stateroom was on the port side.

"I don't want to go to Brisbane. I can't get the right steamer there. I want to go to San Francisco—or at least to Honolulu. At Brisbane I was told I'd still be ——"

She broke off abruptly.

A frown had gathered on Blacky's face. She knew he was going to refuse.

"If you only could take me directly to a San Francisco steamer! I'd make it so much worth your while." Her voice broke nervously.

"Got the money with you?" eagerly.

"No, I haven't. But——"

"Never mind. Come aboard."

She gave an order to the paddlers. The canoe pulled alongside. The paddler nearest the stern passed the two heavy bags to the schooner's rail. Brown stepped on to the rail, reached down, grasped the girl's wrists and with an apparently effortless heave swung her up beside him. She stepped to the deck, and turned again to size up the man to whom she had appealed for assistance.

"What's in them?" was Blacky's direct question, pointing to the kangaroo hide bags.

"Ore specimens," was her hesitant reply.

Blacky picked one up and barked a command to his mate, a gigantic native from one of the outlying Solomon Islands. The mate picked up the other bag and followed Brown to the cabin. The girl was left to follow if she cared to. Apparently that was Brown's attitude. As he carried it, Brown was furtively fingering the bag. It weighed perhaps forty pounds. It was heavy for its size, but he knew that it did not contain gold. Rocks, perhaps, but not gold. It was not heavy enough.

The girl followed to the companionway, then stopped for a look around. Her gaze lingered on the other schooner, then went back to the hideous crew of the *Essen* sprawled in the shade of a tarpaulin awning. She began to wish that she had tried the other schooner first. She did not like the crew of the *Essen* and she wasn't so sure that she could ever like Captain Brown. He was downright rude, but she comforted herself with the reflection that he might be a diamond in the rough.

She descended the companionway and entered the saloon just in time to see Captain Brown open his large pocket-knife. The two bags lay on the dining-table, directly beneath the skylight. The flaps on the bags had been sewed down. Brown put his knife into a seam.

"*Don't!*" In her voice was a ring of command.

Brown hesitated, startled.

"Why not?" He grinned, and the parting of his lips revealed tobacco-stained fangs.

"Because they're my property, and you have no right to open them."

"The —— I ain't," bellowed Captain Brown. "I'm the master of this ship. I have a right to know what's coming aboard. Suppose I put into a port and the customs ask if I have anything to declare. I say 'No!' Then suppose they open these and they're full of—of—opium, or something. A —— fine fix I'd be in then!"

Even the cannibal mate, who spoke fair English, was forced to relax his face at this sudden assumption of virtue on the part of his master. The mate's name was Tuiti, which had been corrupted into "Tooty." Tooty had been with Brown for nine years. He was as faithful as a dog. It was he who kept the wild crew in subjection.

The girl only smiled—and dropped her hand to the butt of the Colt in her side coat-pocket. The smile was wise, ironic; the movement of her hand swift. Blacky Brown stared in surprize. Tooty glanced questioning at him. At a sign from his master, Tooty, heedless of peril to himself, would have leaped in and disarmed the girl.

But Brown was puzzled. This girl in many ways was a new variety to him. Women with knives he had known, and faced. But a woman with an automatic— Revolve the past as he might, Brown could think of no situation like this; therefore he momentarily was at a loss; he could think of no rule to cover the necessary action in this case.

There was a slight bump alongside the schooner. Then a thump on deck. Another and another. Brown looked at the skylight and listened. The girl was suspicious. She backed into a corner and menaced them with the big pistol.

Then a voice at the door, a cheerful, laughing voice.

"Caught a Tatar, eh, Blacky?"

Buck Jansen stepped into the saloon, followed by Fox Clark. Both carried automatics in their hands. On their faces they carried grins. Jansen's was cheerful, Clark's furtive, a nasty sneer.

"What's the idea of boarding my schooner?" demanded Brown, ignoring the girl in the face of this greater menace.

"Just a little social call, Blacky—just a little social call."

"Yeh; we dropped in for tea," added Clark. "Hah!"

Jansen turned to the girl.

"Did you know who this man is when you came aboard?"

"I still don't know who he is."

"He's Blacky Brown."

"Oh! I've heard of him. On the steamer coming over I heard such horrible tales—'Bully' Hayes, Blacky Brown and others."

"Would you rather come over to my schooner?" smiling.

"Much," simply. She smiled.

"How do you know that I'm not included among the other villains?" Buck's smile changed into a frank grin.

"You couldn't be. When you stepped through that door with a pistol in your hand you looked like an angel. I've only one shell left."

Jansen walked over to the door leading into Brown's cabin, removed the key from the inside, then gestured to Tooty.

"Get in!" he ordered.

Tooty looked at Brown, but Brown, scowling, had dropped into a chair and sat dully staring at the two bags on the table. But his brain was working fast. He knew that a word would send Tooty crashing into Jansen—to meet one or two bullets. He did not fear the girl, knowing now that her automatic held only one cartridge, and that it is easy to miss one shot at a swiftly moving man. He would dodge behind Jansen, pull out his revolver and——

He looked up. Leaning back against the opposite wall was Fox Clark, pistol held ready at his hip, a cold sneer on his lips, a light in his eyes that seemed to say, "Go ahead and start something." Again Captain Brown looked at the kangaroo-hide bags on the table; they had aroused his curiosity, his avariciousness—they held something valuable.

He groaned as he arose and started to follow Tooty into the cabin. But Jansen stopped him, held the automatic against his ribs, patted him here and there and finally pulled the revolver from the spring clip beneath his arm-pit.

"You go with us," ordered Jansen, pulling closed the door behind Tooty and turning the key. "You see, Blacky, I'm not looking for trouble, and I'll prevent a lot of it by taking you along. One of your crew can release Tooty and you can order him to scull your whaleboat over to my schooner a little later to take you off."

"How'd you happen to come aboard here?" sullenly.

"I didn't *happen*. I did it on purpose. My dingy was in the water on the starboard side of my schooner—where you couldn't see it. We'd been using it. I came in here to do a little caulking—two seams on the water-line had spit out some oakum. I was watching through binoculars from one of my cabin ports when the girl came aboard here. It was a good guess that she didn't know you. But *I* know you, and the least I could do was to drop over and tell her who you are. That's all."

He turned to his lean-faced first mate.

"Take a bag up on deck," pointing to the table.

"Now you go," he ordered Brown. "Wait! You carry the other bag."

Brown spat out an oath, but the menace of the pistol made him obey.

"Come along," said Jansen to the girl.

Outside the door, rifle in readiness to raise to his shoulder, stood the second mate of the *Cowrie*. He was menacing the half-dozen members of Brown's crew who had stirred out of their slumber because they had sensed that something unusual was taking place.

Brown recognized him. He was known as Eccles, holder of a Board of Trade certificate, but unable to find any one willing to trust him in command of a ship. Brown did not know his other name. The very fact that he had no nickname, that everybody called him by his last name is a slight indication of the lack of esteem with which he was held. Barratry, smuggling, any method of getting money by breaking laws was Captain Eccles' way of staking himself to another prolonged spree. He was iron-handed, cold as ice, bullying. Those who knew, credited him with half a dozen murders, more or less. He was a sea-vulture who could scent loot as a buzzard senses the location of carrion. There were few men who could beat him when it came to fast and accurate shooting with either rifle or revolver.

Blacky Brown almost gasped at sight of Eccles. He had not recognized him when studying the *Cowrie* through binoculars. He could not understand how this man had come to ship with Buck Jansen. Nor could he understand how Buck Jensen would take a chance on signing him on.

He turned toward Jansen, and Jansen caught the queer look.

"I heard you were out to get my scalp," explained Jansen. "So I took a few precautions."

"Well, if you've got any more 'precautions' aboard like Clark and Eccles, I'm glad I didn't try. The joke would have been on me. What the —— kind of a raid have you been on—to sign up a bunch like that?"

Forgotten was Blacky Brown's present woes in his amazement at discovering two birds of evil such as Clark and Eccles sailing as mates under Buck Jansen.

"Oh, a little pearling," said Buck.

Again Brown licked his thick lips at the thought of the pickings that would be his if he could loot the *Cowrie* when it was on the way home from gathering shell in some forbidden lagoon. Brown looked across at the *Cowrie*. Four men, rifles resting on the rail, were covering the *Essen*. Calloused as he was, he grimaced at what would have happened had he called to his crew for assistance. But that was like Buck Jansen, every time. To get ahead of him or to get the best of him, a man would have to get up very early in the morning—and even then the chances were in favor of Buck's being up even earlier.

Blacky Brown cursed himself for being caught off his guard by Jansen. The humiliation of being forced to go aboard the *Cowrie* made him rage until he almost foamed at the mouth. But in the dingey, with Buck's automatic against his spine, he lapsed into sullen silence. He knew his own life would be forfeit if any of his men shot at Jansen. He brooded, thinking up pleasant things he would do to Buck Jansen at some vague time in the future.

"Cannibals have the right idea," he cogitated. "They consider no revenge complete until they have eaten part of their enemy."

Blacky smiled at the thought. The state of his mind was such that he would have taken great pleasure in frying part of Buck Jansen's liver together with some nicely sliced onions. Blacky's wrath had boiled up to the point where a simple murder would be too tame, would give him no satisfaction.

The dingey pulled alongside the *Cowrie*.

"Up you go!" Buck ordered Captain Brown. "Watch him, men," he added.

The girl was assisted aboard and the two hide bags were tossed up to the rail. Jansen and his mates followed. Clark's left knee was on the rail; he swung his right foot inboard with the intention of sitting down on the rail. But at that moment he was looking to the left. His right foot struck one of the bags, knocking it to the deck.

The flat thump of the bag on deck served to split one of the seams its entire length. Across the planks spewed a mass of rough gems—green, blue, yellow, red all in one. They flashed and glowed and changed colors. They were opals—of the finest!

Buck stared in surprize, wondering. His crew were speechless, goggle-eyed. Blacky Brown's lower jaw dropped. Mechanically he licked his lips. Then came the thought that this fortune had been on the table in the cabin of the *Essen*, that he had been robbed of it by his enemy. Reason fled. Temporarily he became a raving maniac. Mouthing curses, horrible obscenities, he sprang bare-handed at Jansen. Buck had set himself to strike, to stop the flood of indecency, for Buck's instincts were those of a gentleman. Carefully he measured Brown's rush, then hit straight from the shoulder. His fist smashed into Brown's mouth. The lips were mashed flat; several teeth were knocked out. The back of Brown's head struck the deck with a hollow thump.

Jansen looked at him for a moment, then ruefully examined his own bleeding knuckles.

"Take him forward," he ordered quietly.

"Tie him up. If he starts swearing again, tap him with a pin. We can't stand for that filth, now that we have a lady aboard."

He stooped and began to gather together the chunks of opal matrix that had rolled farthest from the bag. The cook, with an empty flour sack, came to help him.

THE girl dropped into the nearest chair at the cabin dining-table. She drew a deep breath and shuddered, then bowed forward to the table, her face in her hands. She began to sob, great heaving sobs that choked and racked her.

Buck watched for a moment, then did the best he could. He was not in favor of women drinking, but he considered this an emergency. He seized her shoulder, roughly. He shook her to gain her attention, then placed a tumbler half-filled with Three Star Hennessey in her hand.

"Down it," he ordered. "I've got troubles enough, without having you go to pieces. That's good brandy. It's what you need."

"But—but I don't drink."

"You're going to now," said Buck. "I can see that you've been under a strain. You can regard this as medicine, and me as your physician who's ordering it."

His mock brusk manner caused a faint smile. Obediently she raised the glass and drank until she choked, gasped, coughed and finally shivered.

"Ugh!" she said.

"That's the stuff," grinned Buck. "That's a different kind of a shiver. Now I want to know who you are, and what I'm going to do with you. Go ahead with your story. Be as long-winded as you like. It'll do you good to talk—if I haven't missed my guess that you just arrived from up-country."

"You are a very discerning person, Mr.——?"

"I'm Buck Jansen."

"I'm Elizabeth Fanning. I live in California—in Oakland. My father was a professor at the University of California. He taught mineralogy and assaying. His hobby was the study of precious stones. Dear old dad! He was born fifty years too late for the mining days that would have been a joy to him. He was crazy about prospecting. He spent his Summers in the mountains and on the deserts, and for the last seven years he always took my brother and myself with him.

"I learned to rough it, to shoot. Last year the prospecting urge, the desire to see new places, grew so strong that he resigned his chair, took brother with him and went to Australia. He immediately struck off for the interior of Queensland. Letters came in frequently. From his last one, mailed when they had journeyed out for fresh supplies, mother and I learned that he had struck the most wonderful opal-field in the world. His letter was filled with technicalities that we could not understand. But he said that he and brother would start for home within three months and would bring with them as many pounds as they could carry of the most wonderful harlequin opals the world had ever seen.

"Three months passed with no word. We didn't worry. Then six more months. Mother has a lot of confidence in me; she has always said that I should have been born a man. Finally I persuaded her to let me go and look for dad and brother.

"We mortgaged our home. I took plenty of money along with which to finance my search. I set out from Brisbane, with two men I had hired as guides. It was not hard to find traces of dad. He and his opal mine had been—still were—the talk of every station, every mining-town, every prospector. Rumors were still flying wild as to the riches he had discovered. No one knew, however, exactly where he had found the opals. You see, on his trip out of the bush—the time he mailed the last letter we received—he had been foolish enough to show some specimens. It seemed that everybody in the country went crazy; men came for hundreds of miles to set out in search of dad's mine."

Jansen nodded, and inquired—

"Did you find him?"

"No; he had been murdered together with brother."

She dashed tears from her eyes, as if ashamed of any weakness or signs of sorrow. Jansen looked away, seeming to find much worthy of study in a cockroach peeping out from where the linoleum had curled up in one corner.

"But I found his diary," she finally continued. "It was being kept as a window attraction in a mining-town saloon. No wonder the country was excited. Dad had written down that a conservative estimate of his opals was ninety thousand dollars. But there had been much spying, attempted robbery, trickery—so he had finally hidden the two sacks of gems, despairing for the time being of getting them down to Brisbane. But he had written down directions for finding the hidden sacks. That page was the place at which the book was lying open in the window. A hundred men had spent hours and hours at various times in trying to decipher it." She paused.

"And they didn't?" breathed Jansen.

"No. Part of it was in Greek, part in a silly little code that dad had helped me invent when I was in grammar-school and going through the 'secret writing' stage that all children have at one time or another. No wonder those men couldn't make sense out of it. I suppose I am the only person in the world who could.

"Most of the rough men around the mines were chivalrous and honest. But some were such crafty, terrible rogues that I did not know whom to trust. One of the two men with me was named Larkins; he was a fatherly old-timer. He gave me good advice, and kept warning me against my other guide who was called Steck. But I didn't listen to Larkins. I preferred to use my own judgment. Steck *looked* honest.

"But after we found the two sacks of opals—well, I began to grow afraid of him. His manner changed. He tried to get offensively familiar. Old Larkins watched him continually. He followed him one night—this was after we had succeeded in losing all spies and had started for the Brisbane road. Larkins came back to camp, very much excited. He awoke the native porters and ordered them to break camp.

" 'Steck is one of Bush McQuigg's gang,' " he told me. " 'I heard him tell that you had the opals. They'll be watching for you along the road. You must not go to Brisbane at all. McQuigg can make the officers look foolish. You won't be safe, at all. If anything happens to me, make straight for the coast. You'll have to abandon your horse. It'll be dangerous, but anything will be safer than to try to reach Brisbane.'

"We didn't wait for Steck. We started right out; we trotted fast. For at least two miles those poor native porters who were on foot, had to run with their loads. Then we struck rough country, where the horses had to pick their way slowly. But that night we made about ten miles to the eastward. We made camp at a water-hole. In the middle of the morning Steck rode into camp.

"He said nothing. He cold-bloodedly walked up to Larkins and shot him without warning. I didn't even think. I just shot Steck without thinking; it was the only thing to do. And I don't feel the slightest compunction about it. Larkins died immediately, but Steck was only badly wounded. I left one of the bushmen with him and went on.

"It was four days later as we topped a ridge that I looked back and saw five men riding hard after me. I sent my porters on ahead—ordered them to hurry, toward the next hill and wait on the other side. I tied my horse and went back to the top of the ridge. The riders, single file, were within a quarter of a mile. They were all big, bearded men; every one carried a rifle. I had only my .45 pistol. But I emptied the magazine at them, aiming high to allow for the range, shooting as fast as I could aim each shot. I didn't hit anybody, but some of the bullets came close. They leaped from their horses and dodged into the brush.

"I went back to my horse and galloped after my packers. The five men followed for days and days. I shot at them and shot at them, to keep them at a distance. They tried to get ahead of me, to get between me and the coast. When they succeeded in that, I would start back to the west—sometimes for miles—and strike off to the south or north before heading east again. Several times I succeeded in losing them long enough to get some sleep. They shot at me. They killed two of my porters; they shot my horse out from under me; that was yesterday.

"But yesterday I reached a stream running to the eastward. I paid off all but three of my men. We went on foot along down the stream. This morning we reached a village. I hired a canoe. The villagers stole everything except the opals. When we neared the mouth of the stream I had to threaten the paddlers with my .45 in order to make them take to open water with the canoe. I saw the two schooners—and here I am.

"And I'm *so* tired——"

"That brandy helped," said Buck. "What you need now is sleep. And while you're sleeping, we'll be moving along. Where do you want to go?"

Drowsiness was overtaking her.

"Go?" she murmured sleepily. "To San Francisco—home, home to mother. I'm so tired, so tired of shooting—and that gun hurts my hand——"

She had dropped into slumber, her head pillowed on one arm on the table. Buck thought a while, then picked her up and carried her to a transom seat in his cabin. He was so gentle that she did not awaken. He placed a pillow under her head and tiptoed out.

"San Francisco," he murmured. "That's a good idea. 'Home to mother.' Gee! This life makes a man forget. I'd almost forgotten that I was born in San Francisco."

He went up on deck and called his crew.

"Men!" he addressed them. "You've all got lots of money coming. Those of you who've been there, know that San Francisco is the only place to get your money's worth of fun. The *Cowrie* is heading for San Francisco. You've been on shares so far this cruise. Those who stick will draw wages from today on, in addition to your shares. And your shares will be bigger if you stick; the pearls will bring far more money in San Francisco than we can get from any thieving buyer down here. Who's with me?"

"——, cap!" answered one of them. "I'd like to go, but I don't dare to go back."

"You don't dare," repeated Buck, grinning. "Well, I'll pay you off in Apia. I'm putting in there to get supplies and to send the lady home on a steamer. Hammond," he asked the sailor who did not dare return, "what do you reckon your share is worth?"

Hammond breathed hard, twice.

"Cap, I've been hopin' it was at least a thousand."

"You'll get fifteen hundred in Apia—and after the pearls are sold, if there's any more coming to you, I'll see that you get it."

Hammond looked dazed. He turned to the others.

"By ——! He *is* honest. I'd heard it, but never believed it before. Stick to him, lads. I only wish I could."

Fox Clark turned away, his lips curling nastily. His eyes glowed. He thought of the opals which had disappeared down the cabin companionway.

Eccles stared after him. Perhaps he read Clark's thoughts. He looked at the crew. Admiration for Jansen expressed itself on their faces.

Jansen turned and bellowed an order across to the crew of the *Essen*. He ordered them to release Tuiti from Brown's cabin. This done, he ordered the big islander to scull over alone in the whale-boat to get Captain Brown.

"Heave her short," he instructed Eccles. "We'll make sail."

Twenty minutes later, the *Cowrie*, with only her fore sheet and staysail drawing, was gliding out from around the island. There was much grunting and heaving to a measured "yo-ho" as the mainsail went up. Astern, was towing the *Essen's* whaleboat, Tuiti standing helplessly at the scull oar. Without orders from Blacky Brown, Tuiti was lost. There was nothing he could do, anyway, except obey Buck Jansen. Brown still lay under the forecastle head, lashed to a ring-bolt.

It was not until the island was five miles astern that Captain Brown, still trussed with lashings of rope yarn, was dropped into the whaleboat and the small craft turned adrift. Tuiti would release his master. They would have their work cut out for them in beating back to the *Essen*. Buck thought it was a good joke on Brown. Besides, it removed any danger from a gun battle that Blacky Brown in his maddened state might be rash enough to start if he could return quickly to the *Essen*.

Buck watched Tuiti release Brown, as the *Cowrie* drew away from the whaleboat. Brown arose and shook his fist. Buck grinned contentedly and turned to the compass.

"Make it north by east," he ordered. The *Cowrie's* course was changed a point. She was heading for Grafton Passage through the Great Barrier Reef. Buck laughed as again he glanced astern at the receding whaleboat. Then he proceeded to forget it.

BUT Blacky Brown did not forget. He had become a monomaniac, with but one purpose in life—to kill Buck Jansen. Looting the schooner had become a secondary consideration. Having overheard Buck's plan of putting into Apia, Captain Brown, once again aboard the *Essen*, hastened to sea. He felt that his vessel could outsail the *Cowrie*, perhaps beat it to Apia by as much as three days.

At four o'clock one afternoon the *Essen* dropped anchor at Noumea.

"For provisions," he said to the French officials who promptly boarded him.

They listened politely, shrugged their

shoulders and delicately hinted that the presence of the *Essen* was distasteful and that she had until noon of the following day to purify the port by leaving. Brown smiled and promised to take the hint—in fact he thanked them, but with his tongue in his cheek. He knew the French authorities had him down in their bad books, that they would cheerfully shoot him if they could prove one-half of what they suspected regarding his deeds in the past.

He went ashore, ordered provisions to be delivered before sundown, then visited two off-color resorts. Before doing this he evaded the *gendarme* who had been instructed to watch. He did it by the simple expedient of entering the front door of a café and departing immediately by the rear. Very few words sufficed for his recruiting. Before sundown he was at the pier and went aboard the *Essen* on the ship-chandler's small craft that delivered the provisions.

At midnight he sent a boat ashore to a prearranged, and isolated, part of the beach. It returned with eight men, cutthroats, beachcombers, riffraff. Instead of smuggling them aboard, Brown might just as well have gone to the French authorities and demanded a bonus for taking them away. He got away at daybreak, on the last of the nightly land breeze, and stood away for the Samoan Islands.

Blacky Brown moodily paced the poop deck the greater part of the morning. Then he got an idea—and fervently cursed because he hadn't thought of it sooner. He raided the lazaret, which served as a sail-locker, and ordered some of his crew to haul up on deck the old sails which were doubtfully fragile. Carefully he cut them into rectangles which measured about four feet in length by a foot and a half in width. For a week he kept three men busy with "palm" and needle, sewing the pieces of canvas into bags. These bags were then filled with sand from the fifteen tons of sand ballast in the hold, and the open ends sewed shut. One hundred and twenty of these sand-bags were piled on the main deck before Captain Brown decided that he had enough for his purpose.

He intended to overhaul the *Cowrie* on the open sea somewhere near Apia, and revert to the tactics of buccaneers. With the bags he would build breastworks on both sides of the forecastle head and one on each side of the poop-deck. Behind these his men could lie sheltered while they opened up with rifles on the crew of the *Cowrie*. After shooting the helmsman of the latter, it would be a simple matter to lay alongside and let his Solomon Islanders leap aboard, protected by the rifle-fire from behind the sand-bags. He would be able to discount the superior shooting of Buck Jansen's men, who would be unprotected by anything but the bulwarks. And high-powered bullets would easily smash through these.

NINE days was the passage time from Noumea to Apia—an exceptionally fast trip. The *Cowrie* was not there. She had not been there. Blacky Brown sailed again, licking his lips with satisfaction. For almost a month he sailed back and forth within sight of the island. Each day he laid a course within three miles of the port, mounted to the cross-trees with binoculars and searched the harbor. But he saw no topmasts that in any way resembled those of the *Cowrie*. He began to grow worried, fearing that Jansen had changed his plans. But he could do nothing else but wait and hope. For another month he lay at anchor within the harbor—waiting for a letter, so he told the authorities. And then, taking no chances, Brown careened the *Essen* and scraped clean her hull. He was till hopeful; he wanted no heavy growths of marine vegetation to impede the sailing qualities of his vessel.

And then arrived the mail steamer *Rowland* from Sydney. Sourly, Brown watched the passengers disembark. They could mean nothing to him. He went below, gloomily lighted a cigar and then leisurely started to mix a "Tom Collins."

He heard his mate hail somebody. A boat bumped alongside. He heard voices. A shadow darkened the companionway. Shoes clattered on its steps.

Blacky Brown looked up and frowned. Then his jaw dropped. His eyes bulged.

" 'Lo, Blacky," said Fox Clark, cheerfully.

He helped himself to the gin bottle and a cigar. Without being invited he also took a chair.

Captain Brown's face had been getting redder and redder.

"What the ——!" he exploded wrathfully.

"That's me—in person. Hah!" cackled Fox.

"In about fifteen seconds you go over the rail," threatened Brown. "That is, unless you talk fast, —— fast."

"Want those opals, Blacky? And the pearls?" Clark's grin was knowing and ugly. "Oh, you're interested? Well, I'll accept your apology for wanting to put me over the rail. You were sort of taking advantage of me, knowing that I'd think twice before pulling a gun here in Apia."

"Where's Buck Jansen?"

"Dead—and I know where his schooner is. I just got in on the *Rowland*. I was picked up by a trading-schooner Sydney bound. I got back here as fast as I could, knowing that you must have heard Buck tell his crew he would stop at Apia. I figured that you'd come here a-looking for Buck."

"You figured right," growled Brown. "But what's this about being picked up and taken to Sydney."

"That's right. You don't know that I wrecked the *Cowrie*. I wanted those opals, and the pearls. But I couldn't get Buck's crew to go in with me. Jansen is a little tin god to them. Eccles I couldn't trust. You know him."

"Yes, but I can't figure both you and Eccles sailing as mates with Jansen."

"That's because you don't know Jansen. He knew Eccles and I would never plot together. We were on the beach—stony broke—when Jansen entered port. Both his mates were wounded. He stuck them in the marine hospital and then looked up me and Eccles—knowing we were fighting men. He'd just come back from trying to raid a lagoon near the Solomons. He'd bit off more than he could chew—had almost been cut off.

"So we signed on for a ten per cent. share each. Jansen was to keep half for himself and split the other thirty per cent. even among the five others. It was a big thing. We picked up six Paumotans at Port Moresby to do our diving. Then we sailed for this untouched lagoon. We stayed there six weeks—barbed wire up all the time. Bow, stern and two places amidships we kept deck buckets full of dynamite, with short fuses already attached. Kept tarps over them to keep the fuses dry.

"Twice we were jumped, but the second time cured them. Five of us did nothing that second time but light fuses and throw the sticks. We busted up fourteen big war canoes. You can bet your eye that they're cured."

"And the pearls?" questioned Brown hoarsely.

"Twenty-two big pinkies were the cream. There was a handful of others that were fair. We got a few pints of seeds and baorques. I reckoned my lay at anywhere between three and five thousand. I never saw such pickings. Jansen paid off his divers at Port Moresby and was taking the rest of us back to Sydney—he could get a better price there—when we sprang a leak. He put in behind Frankland for repairs."

Blacky frowned.

"Yes, I saw him come through the passage as I was beating up inside the barrier. That's why I dropped anchor practically alongside. I wanted to size things up—and maybe get a free shot at Jansen. I owed him one. You say you wrecked the *Cowrie*?"

"Sure! You saw those opals? Bigger pickings than the pearls. But do you think Jansen would take them—when he had them right in his hands. The —— fool's too honest. He'd be worth millions if he'd play the game for all it's worth. I told him I wanted my lay of the opals, too. He told me to go to —— and I didn't dare to shoot him. Eccles would have shot me—he was behind me—and then everything would have been his.

"The opals would have been transferred to the purser's safe on a steamer at Apia—so the best I could do was to keep them from getting there. I did a fine bit of navigating. Kept inching off to the south'ard every night-watch on deck. Told Buck the wind had hauled. Then he called me a liar. Polite son-of-a-gun he is. He watched me after that, but I managed to pile her on a reef."

"What reef?"

"Well, one not over twenty thousand miles from here,"

"Cautious, ain't you?"

"That's me—Fox Clark. You furnish the schooner. I'll furnish the information. Half and half. Hah!"

"All right. There'll be plenty for each of us, if the stuff is still there. How do I know that?"

"Easy. I piled her on this reef—smash-bang! At night with a heavy wind abeam and the sea running big. I ran to the wheel and shouted, 'Breakers ahead?' I steered her straight into the center of the crescent of Dunnigan's Reef. She'll be there waiting for us. She can't sink. She's caught hard and fast."

Blacky Brown thought it over. It sounded good. And Dunnigan's Reef was six hundred miles from nowhere, isolated, far from lanes followed by either sail or steam. It was sighted by some vessel off its course perhaps only once every two or three years.

"But how about Buck Jansen? You say he's dead?"

"Dead as a pickled herring. After the schooner struck, I waited alongside the companionway. When Jansen came running up I let him have it—the barrel of the automatic as hard as I could hit. He fell back into the cabin. I searched him, thinking he might be carrying the pinkies in a belt. But not a pearl on him. I searched the cabin the best I could, but could find nothing. He'd hid everything. I had to leave.

"I hit Jansen again just for luck, then carried him up on deck and dumped him into the dingey. We launched two boats, and I found myself together with Eccles and a fellow named Duff in the whaleboat. That left four men and the girl, together with Jansen's body, in the dingey. Both boats got away clear from the vessel. Our boat was whisked to the westward; had no control; too high a wind. The next day the weather went down. I set the sail and started to beat back for the reef, but Eccles and Duff wouldn't stand for it.

"So we sailed for a week to the westward—made five or six hundred miles—and got picked up. The dingey, with the rest of the crew in it, had no sail, no water-breaker, no provisions. In that week she'd drift before the wind at least two hundred miles. Figure it out. Jansen was dead, right at the start. The others died of thirst before the week was up. There was no rain."

Brown rubbed a calloused forefinger up and down his big nose. He smiled, revealing the gap where Buck Jansen's fist had struck his teeth.

"So you hit Jansen twice to make sure. I dunno but what I ought to hold it against you. I wanted to kill him myself. But I can't figure out why you carried him up and dropped him in the dingey. Why didn't you let him lay there?"

"Because one of that —— crew of his came with a lantern. They wondered why he wasn't on deck bawling out orders. This chap busted right down the companionway to see what had happened to Buck. I was feeling his body to see if he wore a belt under his clothes. So I had to pass it off that I was examining him. I straightened up with Jansen in my arms. 'He fell and got knocked cold,' I told the sailor. It was just sort of to alibi myself that I carried him to the dingey.

"Lucky for me that I did. I turned away from the dingey and found I'd lost my pistol. And right behind me was Eccles. I caught the dull glint of the gun in his hand. If I'd started shooting, he'd 'a' got me sure. There's one man I don't want to start anything with. We'd probably kill each other. He smelled a rat. He helped me get the whaleboat away, when his place, as second mate, was with the starboard watch with the skipper. Of course I swiped the boat the captain should have gone in, but I didn't want Eccles along."

"How about him now? How about Duff?" demanded Brown.

"Well, I couldn't kill them off while we were adrift; they had guns and they watched me. So in Sydney I told about the pearls to Mose Aaron. Mose advanced me a hundred quid. I'm supposed to pay him back two hundred, but he won't get it. That was expense money, to let me find you. I gave forty-five quid to a pub-keeper. He's to let Eccles and Duff have fifteen shillings apiece every day for thirty days. Eccles will stay so drunk that he won't remember anything for thirty days. Less than thirty days of drinking will kill Duff. They're safe. Duff doesn't know the location of the reef, and Eccles can't get backing. No one will believe him."

"Huh!" Blacky Brown grinned sourly. "I bet you tried to get Mose Aaron to stake you to a vessel?"

"Sure. I'll admit you're second choice. But if Mose had staked me I wouldn't have had to split with anybody. I'd have wound up in Paris and let Mose whistle for his share. That's why you were second choice. I'll have to split square with you."

"Fox, you're gifted—to get even one hundred pounds out of Mose. *I'll* see that you split with *me*. I'd like to clear port today, but I need water."

"Don't let that delay you. There's a spring on the island back of the reef. Your crew can be rustling water while you and I are hacking away at the *Cowrie's* cabin.

Somewhere on the wreck is all that loot, but we'll have to work to find it. Where you'd pick up the gutter scrapings I saw on deck?"

"Noumea."

"They look it. Get rid of them. They'll smell loot, and our throats'll be slit while we sleep."

"I never thought of that, Fox. I was intent on having enough of a gang to kill off Buck Jansen and his crew."

"Including me." Clark grinned, but the grin was an evil sneer.

"That's off," laughed Brown. "You're with *me* now. I'll get rid of the gang when I go ashore for my papers."

And Blacky Brown got rid of them easily—and cheaply. He took them ashore with him, after advancing a few marks to each of them. When he returned from the customs house, he was alone. The eight men from Noumea remained ashore to get drunk—and the *Essen* sailed without them.

DUNNIGAN'S REEF was a crescent-shaped affair, a ridgebone of pitted lava rising out of the sea, with sandy shores and banks on which coral had began to grow. A few palms were already struggling for existence here and there. Some day Dunnigan's Reef would be quite an island.

The *Cowrie* had struck, as Fox Clark had said, on a coral patch in the heart of the half-moon cove. The storm that had stripped her had not injured her hull in any serious manner. She lay under the blazing sun, tilted forward, her stern high and her bows level with the sea.

In the late afternoon the *Essen* dropped anchor and Captain Brown surveyed the wreck from his own poop-deck.

"Not so bad; not so bad!" spoke Blacky Brown, spitting tobacco-juice on his own deck in sheer exuberance. His spirits were lighter than they had been since leaving Apia. There had been the possibility that the wreck had gone to pieces in deep water, or that someone had already looted it. But now that he could actually see the *Cowrie* before him, apparently untouched, his mind dwelt unhindered on the gems hidden somewhere aboard.

"Not so bad means very good," said Fox Clark. "I told you that I hung her up pretty. She's lying just about the way I thought she would. We'll search her right away."

The two whaleboats were lowered. One was sent to land on the far side of the reef and search for the spring. Three barrels were in this boat, for the *Essen* was running short of water. Captain Brown and Fox Clark, carrying two axes, went on the *Cowrie*. They scrambled up her slanting deck and dropped down into the sodden saloon. Clark led the way to Jansen's cabin and the two men searched feverishly. It took them nearly two hours to batter open the small safe the cabin boasted. The safe held only a few tobacco-boxes filled with seed pearls and baroques, and a bag with perhaps two thousand dollars in gold coin. They stripped out the bunk and found nothing.

They pulled the cushions from the transom and attempted to lift the boards beneath. Formerly this locker space had been filled with nothing more valuable than old magazines and paper-backed novels. It had been the schooner's library. But now they found that the covering boards were nailed down. Feverishly they battered through with the axes. They found the opals.

Momentarily they were satisfied. Then they continued the search for the pearls—the twenty-two thirty-grains-or-better pink beauties that Clark knew of.

"You know," said Clark, "that handful of smaller ones will fetch almost as much as the big pinkies. We'll find that handful hidden along with the big ones."

Parts of the bulkhead, here and there, were torn away. They found and pried up a short length of loose plank in the floor and found only some papers with lists of meaningless names. It was nearly sunset when in despair they smashed apart the big mahogany desk, the drawers of which they had already searched. In a secret back drawer they found a small bag and a neat wooden box. The bag contained the handful of smaller perfect gems. In a wooden box, packed with cotton, lay the twenty-two large perfect pink pearls.

"That's them!" exclaimed the delighted Fox Clark. His face was flushed and his eyes were glittering. Based on Buck Jansen's conservative estimate, these alone were worth twenty-five or thirty thousand dollars. All was better than half. He looked suddenly at Captain Brown. And in Brown's eyes there was the same glitter. The same thoughts occupied both minds.

Blacky Brown quickly pocketed both the bag and the wooden box. Clark's eyes narrowed, his hand crept toward his gun. But Blacky had knelt at the ruined safe. He passed a couple of half-pound tobacco tins filled with lesser pearls toward his partner. The cold glare of the killer left Clark's eyes. He turned away and failed to notice that Brown stuck inside his shirt the canvas bag containing perhaps nine pounds in weight of coined gold.

Each carried a sack of opals as they went up on deck. Walking slowly they reached the rail and got into the whaleboat. Darkness was coming fast, sweeping over the face of the ocean like a shadow over the ground.

They rowed back to the *Essen*, swinging at her anchor. The brief tropical twilight was over. In a fraction of a minute darkness would drop as though a curtain had been drawn. On the forecastle head of the schooner they heard the crew gathered in a sing-song.

Blacky Brown left his bag of opals in the whaleboat. The painter in his hand he went up on deck. His hand met an iron belaying-pin in the pinrail. He snatched it out and straightened up as Fox Clark's head appeared over the rail. He smashed the pin downward with all his strength on Clark's temple. An oath choked on Clark's lips. His hands slipped abruptly from the rail. His body bounced sickeningly off the gunwale of the whaleboat and splashed into the water. Darkness closed abruptly as if this cold-blooded murder were a climax.

Blacky Brown chuckled as he reshipped the belaying-pin. He dropped down into the whaleboat and tossed aboard the schooner the two bags of opals. One under each arm he carried them to the cabin.

Tuiti, his mate, appeared. He reported that the sing-song forward had been started because the other whaleboat had not yet returned from its trip after water. Brown only shrugged. The treasure was his. All was better than half. Nothing could worry him now.

"Maybe plenty fish," he told his mate. "They stop. Put up light. They come back."

"Maybe." Tuiti vanished.

Ten minutes later Tuiti again stood at his elbow, appearing so quietly and suddenly that Brown started back with an oath and his hand went to his arm-pit.

"What now?" he demanded roughly.

"Ship come," announced the mate.

Brown went on deck and gazed to seaward. Three lights were approaching the reef, a red and green and a white. A ship, though still nearly two miles distant! Brown cursed.

"Keep an anchor watch and don't let any one aboard!" he snarled.

Tuiti nodded and moved away. In an ill humor, twinges of fear tugging at his heart, Captain Brown returned below. Who could be coming to the reef? There was only one thing to come for and that was the *Cowrie?* Perhaps Jansen was not dead after all. Well, what of it? Tuiti was on guard. Jansen could not get aboard. He began to wish he had not killed Clark. Clark knew more about Jansen. But—Jansen was dead. Clark had sworn to it.

Relieved at this thought, Blacky Brown pulled out the wooden box and looked at the twenty-two perfect pearls. He lost himself in dreams. The opals! Perhaps worth more than the pearls. Too bad that even some of the seed pearls had gone along with Clark's body. The pearls—at least twenty-five thousand, according to Jansen's estimate. Probably more. Perhaps seventy-five thousand for both opals and pearls. Maybe even a hundred thousand! That was about as high as Blacky Brown's mind could work.

He opened a bottle of whisky and downed four shots in quick succession. But this would not do. He must keep a clear head. He must drink like a gentleman. He opened a locker and got out the ingredients for a Tom Collins. Leisurely he mixed the drink, but he could not help thinking about Fox Clark.

"Aw, to —— with Clark!" he comforted himself. "All is better than half!" He put the wooden box on the dining-table and again feasted his eyes on the twenty-two large pearls. He dropped into a seat and began sipping his drink.

A little later, a shot sounding from amidships brought him to his feet, gun in hand. He dropped the box of pearls into his pocket and swore. There was a sound of running feet, more shots, screams and cries. Brown ran for the deck. Tuiti bumped violently into him, literally falling down the companionway. The mate was shivering, and covered with blood.

"He is here," he choked, crawling into

the saloon and dragging himself up into a chair. Then his head drooped weakly.

Captain Brown seized the native and shook him savagely.

"Who is here? Jansen?"

"No. Cap'n Eccles!"

Brown bit out an oath and his face drained white. Clark had promised that Eccles was out of it, hopelessly drunk for at least a month. Something had slipped a cog—somewhere. For once Eccles, the sea-buzzard, had not let alcohol blunt his instinct for loot.

"No can fight," moaned Tuiti, "seben boy no come back from go for water. I try to stop Cap'n Eccles. He shoot. And 'nother white man shoot—"

The mate slumped in the chair. He slid to the floor, blood welling from his chest.

Blacky Brown again started for the deck, his gun ready. Then he thought—

"They'll be waiting for me." He hesitated.

Heavy shoes clattered on the companionway. Brown stiffened and raised his pistol. From the skylight above him something dropped. The man, for it was a man, wrapped long bony arms around Captain Brown's throat and drove bony knees into his back, sending him crashing face down to the saloon floor. In the doorway stood Captain Eccles, revolver in his hand and a twisted, ugly smile of triumph on his thin lips.

"Let him up, Duff," he ordered.

The man from the skylight arose to his feet and wiped his lips with the back of one hand. He was a raw-boned, big tall man, red-faced, bleary-eyed.

Blacky Brown was some little time getting back his wind. Duff, who had kicked away Brown's gun, helped him to a chair. Brown groaned, panted, then roared—

"What the ——'s the idea, Eccles?"

Captain Eccles smiled sourly and picked up the weapon Brown had lost.

"The idea," he finally said, "consists of pearls and opals. Where are they?"

"You're crazy!" bellowed Captain Brown. "What do I know of them?"

"Quit bluffing, you worm!" snapped Eccles. "I know it all. Duff and I were rescued along with Clark. Clark knew my weakness—or thought he did. He provided kindly that I'd stay drunk for a month. I fooled him. You beat me to the *Cowrie*, but I'm now here to collect. Ah! There's the opals. Now, hand over the pearls! Hand over!"

"Crazy!" bellowed Captain Brown. "I'll have you hung for this! Piracy on the high seas! Those opals are salvage. I just happened here. I don't know anything about pearls. I'm here to refit."

"So am I," said Eccles bluntly. "I'm also here to refit—to refit my fortunes. Search him, Duff."

"—— you!" snarled Blacky.

He made as if to rush the other, but Eccles tightened a finger on the trigger as he poked the .45 a few threatening inches nearer Brown's stomach. Brown thought the better of it. He wished he had not killed Fox Clark. If Clark were only there! Brown dwelt on the pleasing thought. He would like to watch Clark and Eccles kill each other off.

Duff's hand dived into Brown's side pocket and at the first grip caught the small wooden box. He opened it.

"Ah! Here's the cream of the lot, captain."

He pushed the cotton-wool aside to show all of the pearls. Captain Eccles held out a hand and obediently Duff gave him the box. Eccles eyed them quickly and even more quickly glanced back at Brown, pistol still ready. He shoved the box closed with his thumb.

"Listen to reason, Eccles," panted Brown. He looked a lot older, wilted, but his eyes gleamed feverishly. "Let's split this stuff. There's enough for both of us."

"Like ——!" laughed Eccles. "Give you half of the fortune that's aboard here? Do I look crazy?"

"And besides," Duff excitedly broke in, "'arf belongs to me."

Captain Eccles eyed his follower with a half-concealed grin.

"Of course," he agreed dryly. "Of course. Hope you don't have too much trouble in trying to collect it."

Blacky Brown could not suppress a chuckle. Duff must be a fool, a green, simple fool to trust Captain Eccles. Tuiti stirred on the floor and rocked to his feet. He rolled his eyes upward and moaned, then dropped to a chair.

Captain Eccles smiled grimly, running a slow gaze from one man to the other. He laughed at the utter dismay on Duff's face, then covered him.

"You can stay aboard with Blacky

Brown. Perhaps he'll give you half of what he can salvage out of what's left of the *Cowrie.* You see, I'm good to both of you."

"But——"

Duff stopped; his hand crept slowly toward his gun. Eccles' eyes narrowed. He was grinning. Captain Brown took a step forward—hopefully, ready to fight at the first opportunity. Tuiti straightened up. His eyes were glittering, vengeful. He reached one hand toward the back of his neck.

Eccles suddenly twitched his hand. His .45 belched flame. The bullet hit Tuiti's left eye and passed clear through his skull. The big savage flopped backward in the chair, dead. His knife clattered to the deck. Eccles swung the gun's muzzle toward Duff. Duff's right hand was arrested as it touched the butt of his pistol. Duff looked into the grinning eyes of a cold-blooded killer. His hand slowly started forward again, away from his gun; in his eyes was a dunb prayer. But Eccles centered his gun a little more on Duff's solar plexus. His finger slowly, cruelly, tightened on the trigger. His grin was cold, lustful.

"*I wouldn't shoot him, Eccles!*" The voice was crisp, from a man sure of himself; in the voice was just a hint of amusement.

For a moment there was dead silence. Duff cautiously drew his hand farther away from his gun. Brown's jaw dropped; he stared as if he had seen a ghost. Slowly Eccles turned, lowering his gun-arm.

In the doorway behind him stood a lean young man, lithe and tanned, two months growth of beard on his face, with keen intelligent blue eyes and smiling lips. The big blue-steel automatic in his hand seemed no more sinister than his own presence.

"Jansen!" croaked Brown, collapsing weakly into a chair.

Eccles swore softly under his breath; there was fear apparent in the strange pallor that had come to his cheeks, but he had courage. Keenly he watched for an opening. Few men would do even that, when Jansen held the drop.

"I thought," stammered Brown at last. "I—I thought you were dead."

"Almost once—but not now," smiled Jansen. "I suppose Fox Clark told you that. But my head was too hard. And the dingey was smashed on a reef not a cable-length from here. My men dragged me ashore through the surf. The girl swam ashore alone. We've been living on fish ever since, hoping to be picked up by some ship. But we went into hiding when we saw the *Essen.* I knew what you were after. I couldn't get to the *Cowrie* myself, not from the beach. Too many sharks, and we'd burned up the smashed dingey for firewood. It wasn't good for anything else."

"Then how the ——" started Eccles savagely.

Jansen smiled again.

"Brown sent seven of his men ashore as a watering-party. That made it easy for me all around. If those seven men had been aboard here, you wouldn't have been able to have had things your own way. I have four men with me, besides the girl. We had guns. We captured Brown's seven men—left them ashore all nicely tied up with palm-fiber. The boat came in handy. My men have taken over your schooner, Eccles. Hope you don't mind—seeing that you must have stolen her from her anchorage, perhaps in Sydney, to have gotten her at all."

"I didn't steal it!" snapped Eccles.

He had held on to his gun. It went up with the speed of light. It spat directly at Jansen. But Jansen had sidestepped and his pistol roared twice. Captain Eccles swayed, the gun dropped from his hand, then he toppled sidewise.

"Too bad," said Jansen. His voice was sympathetic, but his pistol covered Brown and Duff. He bent over the dead man, then straightened up.

"Come in, boys."

Two of his crew entered.

"Watch them while I search," he ordered.

Ten minutes later, the pearls and opals lay on the table. Jansen's two men had gone up on deck to drop overboard every firearm that had been found in the cabin. The gun-rack had been stripped of twelve rifles. The men returned. Each took a sack of opals. Jansen took the pearls. He turned to Brown and Duff. They were licked, and knew it.

"Good by," said Jansen softly. "If I were you, Brown, I wouldn't try any comeback. My four men are more than a match for both of you and what Kanakas Eccles didn't kill off. You'll find your seven men on the reef, Blacky. I guess that's all."

He disappeared up the companion.

Brown cursed in his beard. Duff laughed hysterically and reached for the whisky bottle.

"I oughta 'ave known it," he muttered.

"Jansen's luck! It just 'in't to be bucked."

"You're dead right," came Jansen's voice down from the skylight. "And remember this, Blacky: My crew saw what you did to Fox Clark. Six witnesses, including the girl. One peep out of you—and you're out of luck."

"—— you!" snarled Blacky impotently. His face which had been drained white, suddenly flushed.

There was a cool laugh from above and the sound of shoes on deck. Then silence. Duff and Brown looked at each other and scowled. Brown licked his lips, then snatched the whisky bottle from the other man.

THE MUCH MALIGNED ARMY ANT

by Gordon MacCreagh

EVERYBODY has heard a lot of the horrific tales about the "army" or "driver" ants; how they sweep across the country in vast glistening sheets several hundred yards wide and devour every live thing in their path, pulling down and swarming over wild beasts and reptiles alike, each taking a mouthful and passing on; how more than one brutal criminal—in fiction—has finally met his just deserts amidst gruesome details at their hands, or rather jaws.

Tosh. All of it. As a matter of fact the army ants—there are several species—are not bad fellows at all. I venture to assert that nobody in all Amazonas has ever seen a column of them more than a foot in width. I have seen dozens of their trails as wide as eight inches, but never more.

It is true they run to three-quarters of an inch in length and that they can bite a piece of flesh out with each nip, as well as sting like a hornet; but no beast that is able to get up and hop need ever be eaten up by a column of army ants.

No, bugs are what the army ant is out hunting for. Worms, beetles, fat caterpillars, sweet things—and, of course, criminals bound to trees. It is common for an Indian, meeting a column, to lay a honey-trail to his hut, gather up his brats and his string of *baccalhao*, and clear out for the afternoon. The ants come in thankfully and delouse that hut with a thoroughness which would be a shining example to any firm of bug exterminators at ten dollars a room; and with sundown they return peacefully home. Mr. Injun reenters and spends his first peaceful night in months.

Sometimes they happen along without any honey trail. I have camped in a deserted hut to take the siesta while the afternoon sun passed over, and have been awakened by the yell of, *"Carralho! Formigas maleficas!"*; and have realized the next second that the poignant words meant malignant ants.

Upon that occasion I waited not upon the order of my going, but just went with speed and sat me down in deep water—and began to understand then why that perfectly good hut had been deserted. With sundown the peons ventured back to collect our gear.

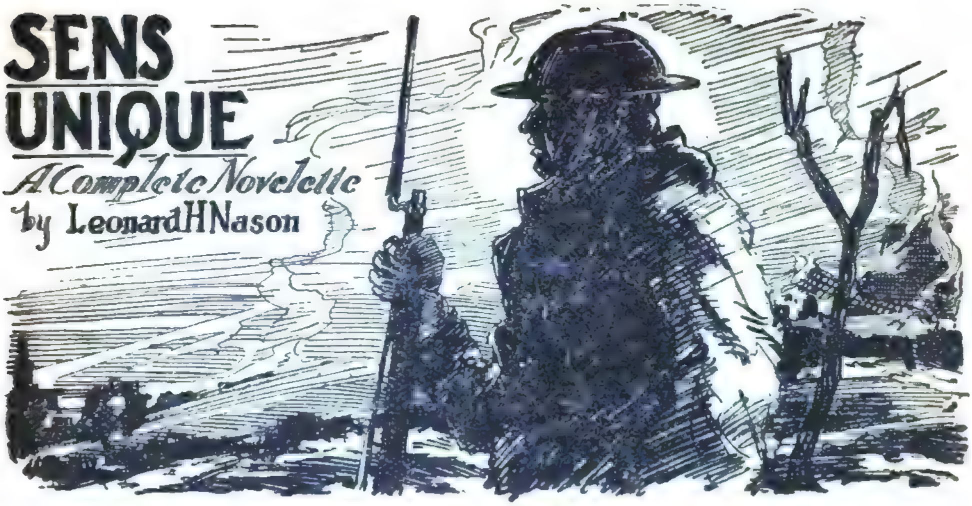
But it was canned grub that evening; for the *formigas* had eaten up a big potful of dinner.

But at that there are worse ants in Amazonas than the army ant.

SENS UNIQUE

A Complete Novelette

by Leonard H Nason



Author of "Three Lights From a Match," "Mid-Summer Night," etc.

A SHRILL whistle echoed through the long room under the roof. There was a rapid pounding of a club on the floor, and a coarse, vulgar voice shouted—

"Prisoners outside!"

Dim shapes and formless bundles, tucked away here and there under the rafters, began to stir; and tousled soldiers, their hair full of the straw in which they had slept all night, sat up and put on such few articles of clothing as they had removed. Silent and bleary-eyed with sleep, they stumbled down the stairs into the stone court still wet with the mist of dawn and still cold with the chill of the early Fall night.

There was a trough there, in the center, into which a soldier who wore no puttees and had no laces in his shoes was pumping some water from a well. There was a great gray building on the north side; a wall to the east that joined the building to a stable which ran along the south side and in which the prisoners were quartered, and a shed with another wall completed the square. In the northwest corner was a huge gate, studded with bolts, and with great iron straps, before which a soldier with a bayoneted rifle stood guard. The stable litter had for years been taken out into the center of the yard and dumped about the well-curb, so that there was now a pile some three feet high, out of which the pump stuck heroically.

"Come on an' wash," said the man that pumped, "an' them that don't want to, get out the way. Hurry up now; ain't much time left."

He gave a few more strokes to the pump-handle and then straightened up, swaying back and forth to take the crook out of his back.

"I'm goin' to get relieved off that job pretty quick," said he. "I had it too long."

"Don't drink none o' that water," he added loudly. "It's poisoned; don't drink none of it."

The soldier who had attempted to drink put down his cup hurriedly.

"When we come here," said the man that had pumped, "this was a frog M. P. headquarters. They had a lot of prisoners in here. Well, the first thing we did was to put creosote on that manure pile. About a day later the frogs raised —— about it; they said it ran down into the well and spoiled the drinkin'-water."

An officer and a sergeant came from the large building. The men began to fall in without command, and the sergeant opened a huge sheet of paper preparatory to calling the roll.

"Is he here?" asked the officer.

"No, sir; I didn't think——"

"Call the men to attention and go and get him. He's no better than anybody else. Bring him to roll-call after this."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant.

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The ranks stiffened as the sergeant barked a command; then after a searching look up and down to see if any eye wandered, he went to a corner of the court to a small shed that might have once been a harness-room. He unlocked it and opened the door.

"The lieutenant wants you to come to roll-call," he said with a tone that implied he hated to do it, but it was an order.

A man stepped out, his uniform carefully buttoned, his face calm and composed and his step firm. He wore an officer's uniform, but the insignia of rank had been removed. The steel on his wrists glittered a second as they caught the rays of the sun over the wall; then he walked across the court and took his place at the end of the line.

Not an eye wavered in his direction, though the men in ranks expired with curiosity for a sight of him. He whose head wandered ever so slightly to the right or left got it knocked in the right direction again with anything from a wagon-tongue to a rifle-butt, whichever was handiest, and well they knew it. The sergeant began to call the roll. It soon appeared that he was one man shy.

"That must be the stew bum we picked last night," he muttered.

He reported to the lieutenant that one man was absent.

"Go and get him! How do I know if he's here if I can't see him?"

The sergeant and two of the armed soldiers that were standing about went up the stairs into the loft. There muffled voices could be heard pleading with some one to arise. There was a suspicion of a voice muttering, evidently the missing one expressing his distaste at being asked to arise at such an unseemly hour.

Shortly there came the rattling, whirring sound and the thump that told of some one pinwheeling down stairs; then the guards appeared with one on their shoulders who seemed dead to the world. He was in that happy condition that the Army calls goggle-eyed.

The two bore him to the watering-trough and soused him up and down with a will. When he began to gurgle they let go of him, and he struggled to a kneeling posture and leaned on the edge of the trough. The officer drew near and looked at him sternly.

"Have you been excused from any formations?" he asked in a voice that was like a piece of ice down the back.

The inebriated one lifted his gaze from the stones and fixed his glassy eye, all dripping as he was, on the lieutenant.

"Mary," said he thickly, "did you put the studs in my clean shirt?"

"Fall 'em out!" said the lieutenant, and retreated into the house.

The men stampeded up the stairs to get their mess-kits, choking down their laughter until they could give vent to it unrestrained. Then they howled and pounded one another's backs until they were sore.

There were three soldiers who had no mess-kits, and these approached the man who had done the pumping.

"We ain't got no mess-kits," said one of them.

"They'll issue you some when we chow," said the man. "What you guys in for?"

"We ain't in for nothing. They picked us up on the road and lugged us in here because we didn't have no orders and couldn't tell where our outfit was."

"Huh! All these guys ain't in here for nothin' but that. 'Cept that officer they got in the shed. He's a spy—that's what he is. He's been here three days now, and they can't get rid of him, because no one won't have the responsibility of keepin' him. This is the first time they've had him out."

"How do you know all this stuff?" asked another one of the three. "What you in here for?"

"I'm in the same outfit that's stationed here. I'll be guardin' you guys next week. I got put in here for overstayin' leave. I had a hundred francs to spend, an' I might as well spend it in one big bust in Dijon as bring it back to the outfit and lose it shootin' crap. I know all these guards; that's how I got the dope about that guy bein' a spy."

"D'yuh know where Sens Unique is?"

"No, I don't know none of these towns but Dijon an' Barley Dook an' Toul. There's chow call; let's go!"

They went with that headlong run that is used to respond to no other call but that of mess.

After breakfast the men had time to wash their mess-kits and stand around a while, letting their meal digest. The three newcomers were informed that working parties would be made up shortly to go out and sweep the streets of the town, unload trucks, groom officers' horses, cut hay or simply dig holes and fill them in again. The whistles began to blow while they were discussing it.

The soldiers lined up once more in double rank, and a guard issued tools, first a rake, then a shovel, then a pick, then a broom, then started over again. The great gate at the corner of the court swung back; then the small door into the building opened suddenly, and a sergeant called out:

"Rand! Clow! Romero!"

"Here!" answered the three men who had arrived the night before.

"Come in here!" said the sergeant.

The three followed him into the house, and the door was banged behind them.

At the far end of the line was a small, boy-faced soldier. He looked fearfully after the three who had disappeared into the house.

"Say," he said to the man next to him. "Where they taking them guys?"

The other man was hunting for a cigaret end in one of the many pockets of his uniform. He was huge of frame and hard of countenance with a face that must have required the highest skill to shave, for it was all lumps and knobs.

"Them guys? They're goin' t' shoot 'em."

The younger man turned this over in his mind, his eyes protruding farther and farther as the full meaning of what the lumpy-faced man had said dawned upon him. Horrified, he gazed at the little door as if he might be able to see through the tough oak of which it was made. The younger man gulped several times and then asked haltingly, as if he feared the answer might be connected with himself in some way—

"What they goin' to shoot 'em for?"

The other man had found the butt for which he had been searching and inserted it in his mouth. He scratched a stump of match with his thumbnail and lit up.

"For chewin' gum in ranks," said he, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

IN THIS tale the last part has been presented first, which is not strictly in accord with regulations. The orderly yarn begins at the beginning, and step by step progresses, and so draws to a close. In this one we will proceed much after the manner of a crab, going backward and in a circle, so that at the end we are back at the beginning once more, and many things that now seem strange will then be made perfectly clear and understandable.

First, let us behold the encampment of a marching regiment. The men have just rolled from their blankets and bethink themselves of breakfast. Nine o'clock on a sunny morning in Autumn. Yes indeed, they rise at nine A. M., for they have hiked all night long, going into camp about three in the morning, where, after the drivers had watered the horses, and the gunners had covered the guns with tarps and dug latrines and garbage-pits, and the picket-line guard had been set, every man fell down where he stood, and was instantly asleep.

The soldiers that walk about in the sunshine appear sad and apprehensive; their faces register deep gloom and cankering care; they seem to be in fear of something and start nervously when spoken to. Perhaps they go into battle on the morrow, and the fear of death afflicts them. Wrong. Perhaps they are within range of enemy guns, and they strain their ears for the first whistling shriek that means the commencement of a bombardment. Wrong again. These men have just come off the front; at four in the afternoon of the day before they pulled their guns out of position, waved farewell to the German lines with thumb, fingers and nose, took foot in hand and came to the place where we now see them by way of Pannes, Fleury, Commercy and intermediate points.

Why then do they not rejoice at being relieved from the strain of battle, why do they not shout and sing happily because they are still alive, why do they not pound one another on the back with congratulations? If the seeker after knowledge will read on, he will shortly be enlightened as to the reason why they did none of these things.

This marching regiment with its fourgons and its escort wagons and its *chariots de parc* and its guns and all was a crack regiment, a well-disciplined regiment, a fighting outfit that had been through its baptism of fire and emerged with praise. It bore a famous name, did this outfit, and the men who belonged to it spoke its number with pride.

This state of things is not brought about by self-admiration nor by press-agenting nor by empty mouthing about glorious tradition. It is brought about by stern, unrelenting discipline, by iron rules administered with a mailed fist.

In an organization of Russians, Finns, Poles, Greeks, Italians, English, French, Belgians, Canadians and all manner of bohunks, hunyaks, wops and spiks, to say nothing of Americans from every State in the Union, men of all ages and from every station in life, thieves and college graduates, school teachers and backwoodsmen who can not write their own names, there must be some central feeling to weld these men into a compact unit. This feeling is called by the Army the Fear of God; but it is not wholly that, for it includes also a healthy apprehension toward the commanding officer of the regiment.

By eternal vigilance, eternal correction, the rigid enforcement of all orders, the ripping of chevrons from sleeves and of bars and even leaves from shoulders, the Fear of God is maintained, so that when the day of trial comes, and the barrage is cracking all about, when direct hits are being scored on the guns, and the smoke is so thick the gunner can not see his aiming-point, when the wires are all out, and the doughboys are beginning to creep in out of the fog and fire from the shelter of the gun-shields, the men will still carry on and obey orders, though obedience means certain death. When an outfit comes out of action there is a mental and physical let-down, but discipline takes a jump.

The men, as I have said, appear full of foreboding. There was a little knot of them smoking an after-breakfast cigaret beside the road. A newcomer joined them.

"Gault's been broke," said he.

"Well what d'yuh know! Who's gonna be a private next?"

"Them frogs has got the right idea," said one of the group. "They wear their stripes on buttons so when they get broke all they have to do is to unbutton them, an' there they are."

A sergeant spat gloomily.

"I hung on to my stripes," said he, "through two trips to rest billets, an' I hope I keep 'em through this one, but it's just a question of luck and nothin' else."

"Look it!"

A man pointed tensely up the road.

"There he comes now!"

That group disintegrated at once like a lump of butter on a hot stove. The colonel, however, turned off into the trees by the headquarters kitchen. He had had no breakfast and was full of rage at certain things the brigadier had said about march discipline, especially regarding men riding the carriages. For all there are seats on caisson and limber, it is one's neck to ride on them.

Now the mess sergeant of headquarters company had breakfasted in his blankets, such being a mess sergeant's privilege, and hence did not know that the colonel had not eaten. Moreover, the appearance of the C. O. at the kitchen except on an official visit was a rare thing. The mess sergeant was overhauling a foot-locker, and the colonel came upon him before he was aware.

"Whose foot-locker is that?" asked the colonel.

"Why, it was here when we pulled in. I was just looking through it to see if there was anything in it to show who it belonged to."

"Let's look together," said the colonel with his codfish eye upon the non-commissioned officer.

He took one of the handles and turned the trunk over so that its contents spilled on the ground. He picked up a garment.

"What's this?"

"A blouse, sir."

"The owner of this must have been a sergeant, must he not, to have two sergeant's blouses in his locker?"

"He might have found them, sir."

"What are these?"

"Bones, sir."

"Bones? No, dice. I think the sergeant that owned this trunk must have played dice, don't you? Foolish pastime, playing dice; woodenhead, woodenhead, woodenhead."

The colonel stirred the pile of clothes with his foot. Underwear, stockings, cards, German belts, two packages of lump sugar and a bottle.

The colonel picked it up and gazed at it with reddening eyes. Champagne; and the night before a case of champagne had been presented to the officers of the headquarters company by the mayor of the town where they had been billeted. The bottle bore a striking resemblance to those the colonel had sampled.

"What is this?" said he with sandpaper in his tone.

"It looks like hair-oil to me," faltered the mess sergeant.

Hair-oil? Hair-oil? Ah, the limitations of the English tongue, the poor, weak, faltering words that we call profanity! The colonel discoursed. He conducted the mess sergeant through all the circles of the inferno mentioned by Dante, and several that that eminent man knew nothing about. Finally he came to an end.

He set the locker up again and closed the lid. On the lid was painted the words, "Kitchen Supplies," and the number of his own regiment. He looked at the mess sergeant, now perspiring freely.

"That's your locker, isn't it? You know that no one but a field officer may carry one, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring me an ax."

It was brought, and the colonel fell upon the locker with it.

"Now," he remarked, "I've reduced that to kindling, I'm going to reduce you to a private. Also, I'm going to have you tried, and I'll see that you get such a fine that if you should serve fifty years in this man's Army, you'd still owe money when you get out."

Then the colonel went his way, and it was shortly known to the regiment that another N. C. O. had fallen by the wayside. It was not for nothing that the colonel was christened —— on Wheels.

THERE was a tiny stream that wandered around and through the encampment. The first battery was encamped by the stone bridge where the road crossed the stream, though there was nothing more than the four guns to show that there was a whole battery there. No shelter tents, no picket-line, and only one lone fourgon for transport, that served at present as the battery office.

Three men had their domicile beneath it and slept between the rear wheels. Two of the three were sitting cross-legged there now, cleaning their pistols. They saw a pair of feet—the first sergeant's they knew well—walk along beside the wagon and heard the sound of a notice being tacked on the side.

Feet and legs began to gather, and words of indignation were heard. One of the men beneath the fourgon put down his pistol and crawled out to see what caused the excitement. There was a pushing crowd by the fourgon now, shoving and reaching on tiptoe to read the order.

"Read it out loud!" they cried.

One of the men who was near the sign began in a loud singsong voice, very disrespectfully and insubordinately, without proper respect for the authority that had issued the order, to read it aloud:

> "Regimental Post of Command, Steenth Field Artillery, Sept sixteenth Memorandum. The commandin' officer notes with extreme disapproval the practise prevalent among members of this command of wearin' articles of uniform and equipment not in accordance with existin' regulations. This regiment is now in the zone of supply, where practises allowed in the front lines can not be condoned. (What's that mean?) The wearin' of leather belts, high boots, laced or leather leggin's will cease. All articles of equipment not issued from a U. S. supply depot will be at once turned in to the supply sergeants of the various units, regardless of whether they are allied or enemy property."

There was a moment of silence.

"The —— you preach!" said some one, and then the crowd began to melt away, some to see what they could do to gather in a pair of roll puttees, some to camouflage certain field-glasses, bayonets, pistols, knapsacks, etc., which they had gathered on their travels and which they had no idea of turning in to the supply sergeant, whose honesty they held to be very doubtful, and who they well knew would steal the gold out of a dead man's teeth without the slightest compunction.

The men were in a sad plight. Many of them wore leather leggings; not a few had on high-laced boots, so-called trench boots, very dry and comfortable for muddy weather; some had blue puttees, stolen from the French, and a few wore the laced legging that had been issued them before they went overseas, and which they had treasured carefully all the weary while since they had left Hoboken.

"Wot t'do?" said a soldier sadly as he rummaged in a grain-box in one of the limbers for a pair of roll putts that he had put there some weeks back. "I'll get put in the mill sure if the colonel sees me with these things."

By "these things" he meant a pair of German boots that he wore.

"Wot t' do! By ——, they's everything in this grain-box but grain!"

He tossed out tobacco, two mess-kits, a French belt, some German cartridge-boxes, a Red Cross sweater, a can of hardtack, a spare bridle, two ditto halter shanks, a fork and a pair of limey shoes, large and black and new. No putts.

Now this particular soldier was gunner of the piece that that limber belonged to, and the collection in the grain-box belonged jointly to him and the caisson jack.

"That thievin' degenerate," said he, referring to the caisson jack, "he's got them putts."

He meditated deeply, turning over the mess-kits, the bags of Bull and the hardtack with his foot. His eye lighted on the limey shoes.

"Well, that's half the battle anyway."

Straightway he sat him down and hauled off his boots. He laced on one of the shoes and inspected it. It was at least three sizes too large, but he reflected that it need be worn only during the day, and he could change at night into his boots again. He picked up the other shoe and was about to put it on, but looked first at one shoe and then the other with growing disgust. Both shoes were for the same foot.

"——," he said, and relapsed into thought.

Finally he put on the shoe, which, being much too large as I have said, went on without much effort, and then got slowly to his feet.

"Now I'll have to find me some putts," he muttered, and went off, being forced to follow a zigzag course and come up into the wind and go about every few steps, like a ship reaching to windward. With both feet pointing west, it will be easily seen that it would be a matter of some difficulty for him to go east without making special effort.

Down the road a way, in a field where it was plainly visible to all who might be seeking, was a salvage pile. A salvage pile is to the soldier what grandmother's old trunk in the attic is to the small boy.

On a salvage pile, the first day off the front, would be all sorts of wonderful things—blankets, both horse and man; saddles, harness and hames, haversacks, mess-kits, rifles, pistol belts—no pistols; they were at too great a premium—shoes, slickers, overcoats, tin hats, gas-masks, spare poles, perhaps a broken wheel or two, maybe some fire instruments, anything that a battery commander could not use and had no room to carry.

If a horse had died his equipment was taken to the salvage pile, for it would only take up room in some wagon that needed the room for something else—wagons weren't as plentiful now as they had been earlier in the Summer—and the chance of getting another horse to wear it was quite small. When men were sent out to the hospital on account of sickness their blankets, slickers, mess-kits and so forth went to the pile in accordance with orders issued to that effect.

If he were wounded or killed in action his property would be distributed before he hit the ground, and if he got out of the dressing-station with his undershirt on it would be due to luck, and not to any forbearance on the part of his comrades.

Now then, it had been the custom for the soldiers to gather round one of these piles and replenish their equipment from it. Naturally they often took things they had no need for, not being able to resist the temptation to steal anything not spiked down.

The time they made their last hike before St. Mihiel some one stole a range-finder and two spare wheels from a salvage pile near Boucq, and the colonel had sworn a mighty oath that henceforth there would be a guard on the salvage, and a non-commissioned officer to boot. What the this and that did a lot of second-story workers and safe-crackers want with range-finders and wagon-wheels? If he'd only known, the range-finder was broken up to get the lenses for burning-glasses, and the wheels stoked a chow gun for several days.

The soldiers, searching eagerly for shoes and puttees, gathered about the pile in the field, not too many at a time, and raked it over. It was rather slim as far as shoes went. There were some on the pile, but no one could use them except an angel, who had wings to fly with and didn't need to walk.

The place was under guard—a corporal from the supply company. He was one with discretion and afflicted with a convenient blindness. His back was toward the soldiers, and he gazed across the pleasant fields and envied a cow that he could see. The cow had a chew, and he had none.

"Ain't that my luck!" said one of those by the pile. "Ain't nothin' here but rope an' haversacks an' harness. I gotta have a Old D belt or a safety pin or somethin'."

"You ain't got no kick. Tie a hunk o' rope round your belly. Lookut me. I got some putts, but no shoes. I been wearin' them trench boots I got off a truck-driver."

"Where yuh get the putts?" asked another one of the men.

"I been wearin' 'em for a belly-band. Now I bet I'll get my never getover."

"I got some shoes," spoke up a sad-faced man with a mustache. "You sell me your putts, will yuh? They ain't goin' to do you no good 'thout shoes."

"What'll yuh give me for 'em?"

"Ten francs."

The man with the putts puckered his brow and did some mental arithmetic. Ten francs, about two dollars; hardly enough to risk a fine and perhaps a term in the mill for. But then he might be able to steal another pair.

"All right, I'll go yuh."

"Gimme 'em."

"Money first, in case of fire."

"Next pay-day——"

"Yuh don't mean to say yuh meant ten francs jawbone? Sell my putts jawbone, an' you get bumped off between now an' the first o' the month an' where the —— do I get off? An' me takin' a chance on a month in the can an' a twenty-dollar blind! Guy, you think you're still in Philadelphia. Well, you ain't, not by about three thousand miles."

The man with the mustache made no reply. His eye gazed fixedly into space, and his Adam's apple must have thought his head was afire, for it could be seen to be dashing madly up and down his neck as if it ran up and down stairs to awaken all the inmates.

The eyes of the others turned to see what the Philadelphian gazed at. There was a falling sound of various objects, including hearts, and a fearful silence reigned. A man had joined the group, a tall, lean man who wore glasses and had a small, sandy mustache and an eye that was the color of ice. He wore a sheepskin coat, and upon the front of his hat was a representation of a tin buzzard. It was the colonel, disrespectfully known as —— on Wheels.

"What are you doing here?" he asked softly. "Stealing property, I see. My, my, that's not right, you know; not right at all."

He licked his lips a little, much as a lion does before meat.

"Well, take what you want, and go along with it. Hurry now; take what you want and get out."

How come, they thought, this soft, low voice? For he could call out when he had a mind to it, so that a runaway team of mules would stop dead and stand shivering from fright at the sound. How come he told them to help themselves?

The guard! Paul's blood and bones, and Peter's wisdom teeth, he was going to skin that guard alive, and wanted to get them out of the way. The guard still envied the cow, and knew not his fate.

Still keeping their fascinated eye fixed on the colonel, each one reached sidewise and seized that which his hand fell upon. One got a complete set of harness for a swing team and went off with it, for he dared not set it down again; another found only a fork in his hand, with which he saluted as he went by, as if it were a sword. The man from Philadelphia made no move to take anything, but gave forth dry clucks like a hen being dragged from a crate; and it seemed that he would shortly fall down in a fit and begin to foam at the mouth and bite hunks of dirt from the ground.

The men had gone on a scant three steps when there was a reverberating roar. The corporal on guard leaped around, and the entire regiment dropped its different tasks and listened. One thousand, seven hundred and eighty-four men who were within sound of the voice looked at each other.

"There goes another pair of stripes to ——", they said, and went on with their tasks once more.

Shortly after, the passers-by on the road noticed a new guard in the field, and had they dared inspect the salvage pile, would have seen that a pair of corporal's chevrons had been added to the various articles thereon.

The colonel wended his way back to the road, mopping his brow.

"By ——," he said, "discipline must be kept up. I fear me that my orders are scantly observed. It is in my mind that I will sit here a while where the men passing up and down the road between the batteries and the echelon must go by, and see if I can not make a little snapping out of it take place."

He sat him down with his back against a pine to wait for what might happen, like some old fox along a rabbit run.

Orders were obeyed in this regiment, as hath been said, whether they related to the oiling of shoes or the conduct of a bombardment. There was bitter moan of course; but the orders were obeyed just the same. Howbeit, there were attached to the outfit nondescript men from the Signal Corps, the Ordnance Department and what not, who thought that they were apart from and above the common wagon soldier. They slept with the headquarters company; and perhaps the conduct of the regimental non-coms, especially the mess sergeant, had some effect on their state of mind.

One of these men, an ordnance sergeant, first class, and very much mindful of that fact, came down the road past where the colonel sat nibbling a stalk of grass. He wore a very shiny pair of red leather puttees that closed in the front with a peculiar ladder-like effect—very doggy, as a limey would say. They had come all the way from Burberry's Paris branch, and the sergeant was justly proud of them. He is the villain of this tale, so it behooves one to pay close attention to what follows:

"Oh, sergeant," called the colonel, "come here a minute."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, and ran lightly up and saluted, banging his heels together very snappily.

"Sergeant," said the colonel, showing his teeth but not smiling, "where were you born?"

"In South Boston, sir."

"You speak English?"

"Yes, sir."

"You read it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Those are leather putts you have on?"

"Yes, sir," simpering a little, as if to add, "and a very nice pair, too."

"Have you a knife?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well," roared the colonel, like Neptune rebuking the waves, "you take that knife and cut those —— —— puttees into shreds and hang 'em on this fence. Then you report to A Battery for duty. You're reduced; do you understand? You're reduced, and I'll see that you don't have any doubts about it. I issue orders to have them obeyed, and they'll be obeyed if I have to break every man in this outfit. On your way!"

Over in F Battery the cook shook his head and took up a long knife.

"That's the second time I heard ol' —— on Wheels bellerin' around these woods this morning. Now every time I hears him give tongue I'm gonna cut me a notch in this plank. They's two hundred non-coms in this outfit. Now then, cook's police, is they any sportin' man here that wants to bet me they won't be two hundred notches on that board by sundown?"

There were no bets.

Two men went by the colonel wearing leather belts. They added them to the puttees on the fence. Some boots took their place on the top strand of wire.

A man wearing the blue breeches that were issued to the French was hailed before the seat of judgment. He was D Battery's first sergeant, which made it all the worse. Yessir, he read and spoke English, and had a knife. Shortly he went back the way he came, looking for a barrel. He had no need to go to the echelon any longer, where it had been his intention to take the supply sergeant to task, for he no longer ranked the supply sergeant nor any one else. The cook in F Battery silently counted his notches; but his tally was incorrect, for two of the culprits were first-class privates.

When the cooks began to pound on the marmite cans, and a pleasant rattle of mess-kits was heard all about, the colonel rose and regarded the fence. A shade of disappointment crossed his face.

"Shucks," said he, "I should have had them tie their chevrons on there, too."

* * *

BENEATH the arches of a stone bridge, by a little, babbling brook that ran happily to the sea, sat two men, one of whom was our recent acquaintance the ordnance sergeant, now a private, as hath been said.

"——'s jingling, chiming bells!" he foamed. "Can you imagine it? One hundred and fifty francs gone glimmering together with my stripes and the fat cushy job that I had that gave me twenty-two hour's sleep out of the twenty-four! And that grinning cross between an ape and a hyena sat under the trees and made me the target of his cheap wit.

" 'Can you read English?' says he.

" 'Have you a knife?' says he. 'Cut 'em up.'

"It was like cutting up my own heart. What time have I to read his silly orders? And now I have been turned to duty with A Battery, to soldier as a common buck with that gang of gool knockers and cut-throats. And my keen, keen puttees, all cut to ribbons!"

Here he smote the sand savagely with his fist and cursed sulfurously through his clenched teeth.

The other man clucked sympathetically.

" 'Tis education that gives a man a fine gift of speech," said he admiringly.

There were words dropping like pebbles from the other man's lips that he had never heard before, and similes whose meanings were far beyond his grasp; but the words had a fine rolling sound, and the ex-sergeant was chewing and rolling them around in his mouth as a man tastes tender viands. The other man had just sold the sergeant a pair of regulation puttees for sixty francs, saying that they were the only pair he had and that he knew not where any more were to be got.

A man went over the bridge, calling in a singsong voice: "Oh, Private Rand! Oh, Private Rand!" accenting the private quite heavily.

"That son!" muttered the ex-sergeant. "What does he want me for? That son! I suppose I get a tour in the kitchen."

He crawled out from under the bridge.

"Here I am. What the—— do you want?"

"Cap'n wants to see you," answered the man.

Rand and the messenger walked down the road together. They turned off where A Battery was encamped, and every man greeted Rand cordially.

" 'Lo, private."

"Afternoon, private."

"How's tricks, private?"

He of the Ordnance Corps made no reply. He was of slender build; and these men who had slept in the mud while he lay dry and warm in a cellar, and had hiked in the rain while he rode in an escort wagon, snoring heavily—These men, I say, yearned for him to make some belligerent remark, that they might bathe his jaws in blood; and this he knew.

The commanding officer of the battery stood with his feet apart, blowing the smoke of Bull Durham through his nostrils.

"Rand," said he, "when a man comes to this battery—from Leavenworth, Gièvres or the Grand General Headquarters at Chaumont—whatever he has been or whatever he has done has no bearing. He comes here as a soldier, and he is treated as one. If a man stands his tricks at rocket guard without going to sleep, if he takes care of his horse and his pistol first and himself last and does not hunt a hole like a snake every time a shell whistles by, I don't care if he has stolen the United States Treasury or spit in the colonel's soup, he won't get any riding in this battery while I command it.

"Now then, we intended to stay here for three or four days, but the order has come to move. Here is a list of the towns that we will go through. We'll stop at the last one. Any M. P. can show you the camp after we get there.

"Now what I want you to do is this: We left three men at Xivray, and I sent word to them yesterday to pull out and join us here. I want you to stay here until they come in and then the four of you follow us. You won't have any trouble; it isn't very far; and you can get rides in trucks and things. Now that will be a good job for you, and will help you get over the first couple of days."

Rand saluted without reply and went back under the bridge again.

A LONELY man sat in his shirt beside a road, warming himself in the afternoon sunshine. There was a huge truck bogged to its axles just in front of him, and another up the road a way, near where it crossed a tiny bridge. Across the bridge was a collection of yellow heaps that had once been a town.

At the cross-roads where the entrance to the town had been was a real old traffic jam. A truck train bearing the tents of a field hospital had come in from the east. Another going north on the road from Rambucourt loaded with supplies had tried to beat the first train to the intersection. A tank coming back from the front line came up to the cross-roads and halted, while the driver thereof stuck his head out of the top and disputed the right of way with the two truck drivers at the heads of the trains.

The tank and the trucks began to wiggle themselves into the ground like hogs wallowing; for the road they were on had felt no hand of man nor wheel of vehicle for four years, so that it was somewhat lacking in holding-up power. Meanwhile slat-wagons, fourgons, ammunition-carts, water-carts, machine-gun carts and what-not came along and filled up the interstices in the jam as mortar fills those in a brick wall.

The lonely man regarded the traffic jam with gloom. His was the loneliness of one who is among crowds, yet hath no friend.

Convoys of prisoners went down the road, shuffling along in their dirty gray uniforms and poisoning the air with a fearful stench as they passed. French troops went north; a few walking wounded went south; a general, all brass and polished leather, trotted by with his inevitable staff of jingling aides and colorful French officers. They rode across the field back of the lonely man, and he thought gloomily of how he had crawled around that very field earlier that same day, soaked to the skin and with his heart against his teeth, watching the lights go up from the German lines. There was a week-old stiff down in there—see! The general's horse shied at it—that the lonely man had put his hand into—not on; into—when he was crawling around.

He looked across at that great lump of a hill, that rose from a wide plain like a boil on a man's neck. A painful boil it had been to the French all those years, till the Yanks came along and blew the top off it and chased around it and went on up into the country, trying to get near enough to the enemy to take a shot at him. Mont Sec, they called that hill, and the town was Xivray. Down the road was Seicheprey, where a traveling circus had come over on the Yanks when they were green at the game and had taken most of a regiment of infantry back to Germany with them.

The lonely man looked away off to the north and tried to count the columns of smoke where Fritz was burning his supplies and thought of all the men that had butchered each other up and down that rolling plain and how many dead, buried and unburied, there were within the sweep of his vision. He shivered a little and felt of the clothes that he had spread around on the ground to see if they were dry enough to put on. It would be dark pretty soon, and he wondered how he was going to stand spending the night there.

When he stood up he could see the old German trenches, blown into a brown scar on the landscape by the barrage. Probably they were full of dead Huns. Yesterday afternoon it was your death if you sat in that field, and now all the German officers with their monocles and their field-glasses that used to pike you off from Mont Sec were lying dead in the chambers and caverns up there, or heading home and wasting no time; and all the machine-gunners that bumped you off from beyond Richecourt were doing the same thing, and nigger labor troops were repairing the road where a German patrol had taken prisoners fourteen hours before.

A horseman came through the field back of the town, climbed the slope and hailed the lonely man.

"Hey, Romeo, is this us?"

The lonely man leaped with a glad cry.

"Well, —— t' ——! I thought I was forgotten sure. Where's the outfit? Got any chow? Git off that *chevaux* and mitt me. You're welcomer than pay-day."

The other man dismounted and began to uncinch his saddle.

"The outfit's up at Nonsard, in back of a hill. Gonna back up another push at daybreak. Old man sent me back to get up some of our rollin' transport. Water-cart's in No Man's Land; rollin' kitchen's missin'; two caissons 'way up th' line near where the Dutch had some kind of a rest camp, all the men's pack in a heap halfway up where the old support trenches used to be. Everything bogged to the hubs, and the Old Man ragin' like a prairie fire."

"How come all the men's packs in the mud?"

"Yuh mind we was t' wear nothin' but side-arms? Yuh mind all the blankets an' stuff was t' be left behind an' brought up later? Well, that new looey, that McNally guy, he was left in charge of th' kitchen and the chow and th' property and th' spare horses and whatever else there was that we didn't take, and he loads all the chow an' all the men's luggage an' all th' officers' beddin'-rolls an' the forge an' anvil an' a six-inch howitzer that the heavies left behind on to one fourgon an' starts it off."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh. The fourgon got up all right, but they threw out everything that was in it but th' old man's stuff. So they sent me back to gather it in."

"They ought to string that guy up," said Romeo.

The horseman tied up his steed to an old post that had supported telephone wires at some distant time and spread some hay that he had stolen from a French wagon where the horse could reach it. Another man came across the field on foot and was joyously hailed by the first two.

"I seen you go by, Clock," he said to the man who had ridden the horse, "and I yelled, but you didn't hear me. I don't aim to stay out there by them trenches all night and freeze to death."

"Where you been?" asked Romeo.

"Guardin' the packs and chow. Do you know what that cheesehead did? Throws off the bacon and flour and all the outfit's blankets and goes on with the forge and the anvil and a barrel of horse-shoes."

The three chanted another anathema. The third man was named Keith. I might have said that the horseman's name was Clough, pronounced Cluff, but that some mustering-officer on a far-away day called him Clock, and the name had stuck.

"Yeh; but food, food, we must have," said Romeo. "While I was sittin' here watchin' the jerries go by I thought maybe they might be some blankets in that trench across the road, and perhaps a stray can or two."

"Come on we look," said Clock; and the three jumped down the bank and crossed the road into the trench that ran off it at right angles.

"Lookit!" cried Romeo. "Yuh'd think we retreated an' not the jerries!"

"Ain't that the works!" said the other two admiringly. "Who jumped off here?"

"No one jumped off here. This gang was relieved before we come up. Don't you remember that bunch of Johns that used to be here, always challengin' us when we was buryin' ammunition? They got relieved night before last so's they wouldn't gum up the drive. They must 'a' just picked up the old rifle an' gone."

The trench was carpeted with blankets, leather jerkins and rubber boots. Cans of beef were scattered as far as the eye could see. There were two big cases of emergency rations on the fire step.

"Let's grab off some of those dry blankets," said Keith, "and up with the emergency rations. This will be the life of Riley. Sugar and coffee and all the works. Let's move down into the town."

"Can't do it," said Romeo. "I'm guardin' that wire an' picks an' shovels and stuff. We got about a thousand rounds of ammunition here, too, that we didn't get a chance to fire."

"My ——!" said Clock. "Is there any one that ain't guardin' somethin'?"

The three of them lugged the case of emergency rations up the bank beside the road. These cases were made of tin and contained so many cans of beans, so many cans of corned bill, so many cans of hash, hardtack, coffee and sugar, the amount of each all plainly marked on the outside.

The case was not supposed to be opened except by authority of a commissioned officer. They were supposed to be kept for emergencies, such as the isolation of a trench by gun-fire, or the failure of supply during battle.

"You'll get tried for breakin' into that case," said Keith.

"Well," replied Romeo, "if your conscience hurts you don't need to eat none. This here is all the authority I need."

He swung a pick at the corner of the case.

"When General Belly gives orders, I leap to obey."

He thrust his hand through the hole he had made and hauled out a small sack of sugar, then proceeded to attack the case again until the contents were easily got at.

"Come on, now, scatter round an' get some wood, break up some o' those duckboards an' we'll have supper. I'm goin' to put on my clothes."

When Romeo finished putting on his O. D. shirt and his blouse and his breeches and his puttees and his overcoat over them and a slicker over his overcoat and a leather jerkin over all, he found that Clock had started the fire, but that Keith had lent no aid to the preparation for supper. Romeo opened a can of beans with the pick and held them over the fire in his mess-kit to warm them.

"Come on, you," said he to Keith. "You ain't in no restaurant now. Heat up some coffee. Got any water in your canteen?"

"I haven't no canteen," said Keith.

"Yuh —— —— conscript!" cried Clock. "'I ain't got no canteen,' says the man. Well, yuh jolly well got t' go dry then."

"I ain't a —— —— conscript," said Keith. "You're a —— —— draft-dodger. You didn't have the nerve to take a chance on the draft, so you went and enlisted. I was always learned to wait till I was invited before I horned in on anything."

Clock's jaw dropped with a distinct click.

"Draft-dodger! Can yuh imagine that?"

He tried to glare the other man out of countenance, but Keith was looking into the flames.

"That's a —— of a fire," said he. "Why didn't you get some dry wood?"

"You can go get some more if you want to," muttered Romeo. "They's lots of it around."

"I'm too tired," said Keith, "and it's getting too dark."

They took the beans off the fire and spread them on some bread that Clock had brought along in his saddle-bags. They made two cups of coffee and told Keith they would see him in —— before they would give him any. He sat and watched them drink it with a martyr-like air and said that the bread tasted of horse. It grew dark, and they replenished the fire with much the same idea that their ancestors in remote ages did, to keep the devils away.

The horizon was ringed with fires from the burning dumps.

"I guess this war is about over," said Romeo. "Look at the way the jerries run today. Hang your eye on all them fires. Think o' the tons o' chow and uniforms and grain an' ammunition that's burnin' up in 'em. They ain't got much chow to lose, either, them Huns ain't."

Clock nodded and blew clouds of Bull Durham from his lungs.

"It can't get over too quick for me."

"I hope it won't ever get over," said Keith; "and it won't for some time, you bet. The Germans got to within sight of Paris twice, and they ain't won the war, while we ain't been out of France yet."

"How come you don't want the war to get over?" asked the other two.

"I got a wife waiting for me in Chicago that I don't aim to have set eye on me again."

"Can't yuh stay in N'York?"

"Well, that's the —— of it. I got one there, too."

Silently Clock and Romeo got up and made preparations for sleep. They had hiked all the night before and had dug in the battery during the early hours of morning before daylight. They craved sleep. Keith went so far as to brush over the ground on which they were going to spread their blankets and remove all stones, bits of wood, etc. They put down three blankets under them and lay down fully clothed, piling eight or nine on top of them. Each man used his tin hat as a pillow, keeping it still on his head, but moving it to one side so that it cradled his head nicely in its padded lining.

"Suppose they pulled off a counter-attack and gathered us in," said Romeo.

"There will be a whole lot of army go charging through and over us before any Hun gets back this far, and don't you forget it," said Keith. "There won't be any attack. I seen some of those Boche this morning when they wanted to go somewhere. If they had a feather in their hand they could have took wing like a bird."

It was a clear night, and the three lay a while and watched the searchlights in Toul. For all it seemed that the enemy had suffered a severe defeat, his airmen were very active. The searchlights barred the sky like a wall of swords, waving, crossing each other, hunting, hunting till they would come to a stop; and far up in the broad part of the light the men could see a little white moth.

Another shaft of light would cross the first; and then, no matter how the moth spun and dropped, turned and spat flame, the two shafts of light would cling to it until it came down, turning over and over like a falling leaf, and crashed to ruin.

"How do they know they ain't got one of our planes in their old lights?" asked Romeo.

"Ours have got a green lamp or somethin' on 'em. You watch and you see one go by maybe."

"Naw, I don't want to watch. I'm so glad that for once I can go to sleep and be sure that I won't wake up dead, that I don't aim to lose no time stayin' awake."

He waited for a reply, but none came, for the other two were already pounding their ears.

"RISE an' shine," called a rude voice in the ears of the sleeping men. "First call has blown. Up now; everybody up."

The three sat up cursing. It was broad

day; in fact, it was but an hour short of noon. A man bearing the brassard of the military police was pulling at their blankets and roaring like a bull.

"What's eatin' you?" asked Clock.

"What you babes in the wood doin' here?" asked the M. P. "Ain't yuh fraid so far from mama and daddy? Little boys ain't supposed to be bivouackin' round alone by themselves."

The three raged. They were alone in the field, and all of them were armed. One dead man more or less— The M. P. saw their evil thought in their eyes and stepped hastily back toward the road, where there was an officer in a side car.

"What organization do you men belong to?" called the officer.

Now it is an evil thing to hail a man from sleep and then taunt him, especially if he be a fighter and the taunter a noncombatant. The three tossed aside their blankets and walked over to the bank above the road.

The M. P. went down and took his stand by the side car, keeping his arms folded. He was no coward, that man; but he was no trouble-hunter either, and he had it in mind that it would be well if he kept his hand far from his gun.

The lieutenant looked at the white lips of the three, drawn back from clenched teeth. He looked back toward Rambucourt and forward to Xivray. The road was deserted. There was no traffic jam now, no hurrying frogs, no shambling prisoners. Five minutes before the road had swarmed with men; five minutes after it would be just as crowded again; but right now, when his authority was being flaunted, there was no one in sight but three evil, dirty men on the bank above him; and if ever bloodlust shone from any one's eyes, it shone from theirs. Three to two. Three to two; and the lieutenant would be the first to die.

"Let's go," said he to his companion, and the side car barked down the road.

"——!" said Romeo. "I was scared. I couldn't think up no lie for the life of me."

"You didn't need to lie," said Keith. "We're all guarding property. I would have told him so only I was scared that big M. P. was going to pull his rod on us, and I wanted to be ready to flop behind the bank."

"Well, we was on duty an' all that, but you know what those guys are like. They get their claws on you, an' back you go to some stockade, and they keep you mendin' roads for a month or so before they ask any questions at all. Then if you're all right maybe they let you go, an' when you get back to your outfit you get tried for being absent for all the time you was away."

"I was mad at that guy," said Clock, "and I'd have busted him in th' jaw, officer or no officer. I'm savage as —— when I get waked up sudden that way."

They had some coffee and toasted the last of the bread and had some more beans for breakfast. Then Keith took his departure. He said that he ought to go back and see how his pile was; but the other two suspected that he feared the return of the officer of police with reenforcements.

"It's half-past eleven," said Clock. "I ought to be going back to the outfit. The old man will be hermantile if I don't."

"Where's your *caballo?*" asked Romeo suddenly.

Where indeed? No horse.

"Was he there when we went to sleep?"

"I dunno. I give him some hay, an' then I never thought of him again. He had some water just before I got here yesterday."

"Well," said Romeo, "he probably went back to the battery."

"Yeh, sure, and took th' saddle an' bridle and blanket in his teeth."

"In the zone of the armies," said Romeo, "findin's is keepin's, 'ceptin' when the other guy sees you find it."

"By ——," said Clock, sitting down dejectedly, "I guess I better go absent. When I get back to the outfit without no horse my name is goin' to be dirt. One saddle, one bridle, th' property of the United States, lost in action, found on the payroll."

Again they were hailed from the road, this time by name. The two ran over. A mounted officer consulted a paper in his hand.

"Are you men from A Battery?"

"Yessir."

"Abandon whatever you're guarding, and join the regiment at Savigny. Here are your directions how to get there."

He handed them a slip of paper.

"Are there any other men from your outfit around here?"

"No, sir," said Clock and looked at Romeo with a hard eye.

The officer went his way.

"What you gonna do about Keith?" asked Romeo.

"Leave the son," said Clock. "That bird never see the officer 'cause he would follow the road around by Baussant, an' Keith is out on No Man's Land in front o' Richecourt. Leave him. He ain't got anything in his head but cheese anyway. Said I was a draft-dodger. I put more time at parade rest than he's got in the Army."

"Savigny, huh? Well, let's make up a pack an' go. From the looks o' this list we got quite a walk ahead of us. Also, we ain't got no written authority to be makin' any tour of France."

"You was wantin' to go absent," said Romeo. "Now's your chance."

"Huh! I can tell 'em th' horse died on the road. That's an alibi that can't be beat."

They rolled themselves packs, making them up in the old horse-collar shape, for they had no pack-carriers. They put a few cans of beans in the roll and started out.

"You ain't goin' far in all that leather jerkin an' overcoat and fifty slickers you got on," said Clock.

"Am too. If I can't carry both them an' the pack, we'll balansay the pack, as the frogs say."

"Come on. We ain't no automobile; we can't run on gas. Let's go."

ON THE afternoon of the third day after Clock and Romeo started to rejoin their outfit, two dusty, ragged soldiers awakened one who slept in the shade of the battlements of a bridge, just outside Savigny. They had noticed that his collar ornament bore the number of their regiment.

"Where's there an artillery outfit camped around here?" they asked.

"Are you birds from A Battery?" asked the newly awakened one.

"We are, yuh know," was the reply.

"For ——'s sake where have you been? I've been waiting here for two days for you. I'd begun to think that it was some dodge to get rid of me. The outfit pulled out yesterday, and the old man left me here on the chance that you two would get in. I would have gone last night, only a man came in and said you two were on your way.

"Another guy said we was on our way, huh? Who d'yuh suppose it was?"

"He's under the bridge now washing himself, if you want to see him."

The three went down a flight of stone steps that led to a float where the women of the town did their washing. A man who was shaving before a steel mirror turned at the sound of their hob nails. In spite of his disguise of lather they could see that it was Keith.

"How'd you get here?" asked Romeo, gaping.

"——," said Keith, "an officer told me where to go. He said he seen you men, and give you directions where to go but forgot to tell you that you might get a ride in the ammunition-train trucks. He said they'd go about five o'clock. I waited till four o'clock and then went to Rambucourt and got on a truck. I seen you was gone when I went by where we slept."

"How come that officer to be riding across th' field where you was?" asked Clock.

"There's a short cut there from one road to the other. That's why the wagons went across in the first place when they got bogged and threw all that stuff off. The trucks went down through Toul and then come north. They're going to Blercourt, up back of Verdun to make a dump.

"No rest billets this trip. There's another party on. I jumped off here. The ammunition-train officer said this must be the place, and that the one on the list we had was spelled wrong."

Clock and Romeo looked at each other wordlessly. For two days they had wandered, jumping on and off trucks, arguing with military police who yearned to incarcerate them, begging meals from outfits camped along the way. Rambucourt, Raulecourt, Fremerville, Lerouville, Savigny the directions had read. The two had wandered all over Meurthe-et-Moselle and south to Vaucouleurs; and this spike-head had beaten them by a day, and had a soft ride of it.

"Well, what'll we do now?" asked Clock dejectedly.

"The outfit's gone to La Vallée," said Rand, "and we'll have to follow."

Clock and Romeo groaned.

"Let's wait till dark," they pleaded, "an' maybe we can get a ride on a truck."

So the four of them sought the shade and prepared to sleep until nightfall.

A BLACK, black night and rain. A night that made one yearn for a cozy home and a leaping fire, a night when a man likes to dig up the old brier and get out a good book and toast his heels and hug himself to think that he has a roof over his head, while the rain beats on the window. Certainly this was no night to be out walking, on a dark road, wet to the skin and plastered with mud from crown to heel.

Clock, Rand, Keith and Romeo, cursing and raging at their luck, ready to drop with weariness, struggled on. They were not lonesome, for they had some half-million men for company. The American Army was on the move. No longer the few scattered units of early Summer with their French wheeled transport, their British trucks and their horses from Italy; but a real American Army, equipped by Americans, supplied by Americans, with their operations directed by an American General Staff and a chance to show at last what the Americans could do if they were allowed to fight in their own way and not make so many strategic retreats.

They moved like the great hordes that overran Europe in the early days of history; the roads were choked with them. If the road was narrow, traffic moved only one way on it, but if it were wide there would be two streams, infantry and artillery on one side and trucks and autos going in the opposite direction on the other. Some roads were given over to motor traffic exclusively—pigeon trucks, balloon trucks, rolling photograph studios, field and evacuation hospital units, camouflage sections, Red Cross and Y. M. C. A. trucks, trucks full of canned willies and trucks full of hay, all rattling and banging on their way, running through that blackness without light on front or rear and trusting to a kind Providence to let them know when the truck in front stopped. Other roads were for artillery; seventy-fives, six-inch, eight-inch, heavy guns that were dragged by one truck and had two that went along to pull the first one out of holes, heavier guns that had to be hauled by a great tractor like a steam roller, anti-aircraft batteries, anti-tank guns, anti-everything guns.

All around and within this great concourse were soldiers who wore red bands on their sleeves and hard looks on their faces. They were the military police, and they hung about like wolves around a herd of caribou, ready to snap up any straggler that was so foolish as to get beyond the protection of his officers.

At the first peep of day the marchers made for cover, in cellars, in woods, anywhere that protected them from airplane observation, and, dropping down to sleep, fully clothed and armed though they were, slumbered on until evening, when they would be awakened, fed and sent out on the road again.

The four men from A Battery joined in the migration. The rain fell softly but steadily, and Clock and Rand were without slickers, so that they were in a sponge-like condition in a short time. They started out alone, joined up with a column of infantry; and before long, while they were still marveling, they found themselves bumping into big caissons. In the darkness that was like a wolf's mouth they wandered from column to column, inquiring at every town they entered for the name thereof and checking it on the list they had. By wonderful fortune they kept on the right road; but it was nearly day and they were half-dead from weariness and cold when a huge sign, with foot-high letters on the wall of a building informed them that they had reached La Vallée.

"But where's the outfit?" demanded Keith.

The others spoke to him feelingly.

"Let's sleep till morning and find it then," was the consensus.

Somebody's ration train was encamped just outside the village; and the four crawled into one of the wagons, after having made peace with the sentry, and slept until daylight, when the guard awakened them and bade them depart before the officers were up and looking for trouble.

"I'm lame as ——," said Romeo, stretching and rubbing his elbows. "Them escort wagons are pretty hard. Let's hurry and get back to the outfit. I yearn for some breakfast."

"They won't eat till nine o'clock, and it's only six now," said Keith. "We got plenty of time to find them."

"I could sleep some more," muttered Rand. "Two hours or so isn't so much good. I hope it will be fine today. It's always getting ready to rain or else just getting over raining. I wish it would be clear for a day anyway."

It was clear that no artillery outfit was at the end of the town where they now were, for there were only two small clumps of trees, in both of which were wagon-trains. The work of finding their regiment was doubly difficult since these marching regiments must be concealed during the day, and any one hunting for them and not knowing their exact location had to explore every grove. Around the town and back of the town and through the town the four went, while the sun came out and the birds sang and the airplanes coming back from the dawn patrol went humming by overhead. No sign of their regiment.

They sat down in the ditch and ate the last of the hard bread and beans they had brought with them. An M. P. went by, and him they hailed.

"Hey, guy," asked Clock, "do you know what outfits are camped round here?"

"Nope."

"Do yuh know if there's any artillery anywheres round?"

"Nope."

"Do yuh know where we could find out if there's any here?"

"Nope."

"Nope! Nope! Nope! That all you can say? Ask him if he knows what army he belongs to!"

Thus Keith, who was irritable from lack of sleep.

"I know four guys that's goin' in the mill if they gets fresh," remarked the M. P.

"Now look," cried Rand hastily, "we're trying to find the Twenty-fifth Field, and it's supposed to be somewhere in this town. You might have seen the number on some of the wagons."

"The Twenty-fifth?"

The M. P. thought deeply, his eye roving about the group. Ask him what army he belongs to? Huh!

"Yes," he said slowly, "I think I did see that outfit. They pulled out last night."

"Where'd they go?"

A far-away look came into the M. P.'s eye.

"I think," he said, "they went to Sens Unique."

"I knew they'd be gone when we got here."

"Shut up, Keith; you're always having bright thoughts. How can we get there?"

"Walk."

"Yes, yes; but which is the road?"

"Go right down through the town and keep on, then take the first road to your right, and you'll see a sign that shows the road."

The M. P. went his way hurriedly before they could ask him any more questions.

"Now we've got another fifteen kilos or so to hike. I'm about done."

There was no enthusiasm. They dragged their weary way into the town, and the four of them sat dejectedly on the steps of a house. Rand's eye roamed up and down the street and then came suddenly to rest. His body stiffened like a hunting-dog making a point.

Across the street there was a small touring-car of popular make, and unoccupied. There was a number with the letters U. S. stenciled on the side. The chauffeur was perhaps inhaling liquor somewhere. The car was probably locked, but that would be of small avail, as Rand knew a trick or two regarding that particular car, and many others for that matter; for before the war comrade Rand had made a close study of automobiles, the various ways of protecting them against thieves and the manner in which such protection was rendered useless.

"Look now," said Rand, "You guys go down the street a ways, and I'll surprize you in about two minutes. Our walking days are over. You see that Ford? Well, we will continue our journey in that, and we'll be up with the outfit in no time or find out where it's going, go on to that place and go pleasantly to sleep."

"We'll get caught, sure," said Keith.

"Who's going to catch us? Won't it be dark as pitch? Do you suppose they stop every car and make the driver show his dog tag?"

"Well," said Clock, "you go an' steal it. We don't need to look, an' if you get caught we don't know yuh."

"You be ——," said Rand.

Then he went down the steps and around the corner.

The other three hastened down the street and around a turn in the road; then they cautiously poked their heads out so that they could see the automobile. A man came out from one of the houses, cranked the car and leaped into it.

"——!" said Keith. "I knew he couldn't do it. Now the guy that owns it has got it."

The car turned around and came down the street toward the men. It slowed as it passed them, and a voice cried:

"Hop on! Hop on!"

They hopped and departed at breakneck speed.

"We'd better hole up in the woods," said Keith after a while, "because we don't want to run around these roads much in the daytime. "Yeh, and we want to be sure they ain't no soldiers around where we leave it either. We don't want it swiped again."

"Can't swipe it," said Rand. "I'll lock it."

"What'll yuh lock it with?"

Rand produced from his pocket a common nail-file.

"Compree that nail file?" said he. "It'll unlock any of these flivvers by just putting it in and turning it around.

He circled around a flock of geese on two wheels, and then put his feet up on the side of the car.

"This is the life," quoth he.

"I'd just as soon you was a little more careful an' not so skilful," said Keith. "I don't want my neck broke just now."

"We're going to stop anyway. Let's duck it in these trees."

They turned off the road, ran over the grass a way and stopped. They broke off some limbs and covered the back of the car with them, then crawled underneath and went to sleep. They awakened late in the day, when it was dark, and took to the road again. Traffic was thick, and they had some difficulty in knowing which road to take.

"The M. P. said to take the first road to the right, and then we'd find it sooner or later."

Clock tried to see something in the blackness that would indicate a road turning off but could find none. Rand was finding that driving a car on those crowded roads without lights was not as easy as it might sound. Twice he narrowly escaped collision, once with a big four-wheel-drive truck full of doughboys, and a second time with a limousine, whose occupants put their heads out and damned him horribly. Keith and Romeo sat in the back seat in a state of moist terror, for the infantry in the trucks they went by would now and again thrust their bayonets through the top of the car in a playful manner.

"Hey!" said Keith as they skidded wildly and the muzzle of a six-inch-long slid by about one inch away from their noses. "Have a heart, will you? Where's the fire? We ain't tryin' to make a non-stop record, are we?"

Rand turned around savagely.

"Do you want to drive? Do you want to drive? You can drive if you want to! Do you think I've got eyes like an —— —— cat?"

"I don't want to drive," said Keith placidly. "I'd rather ride in the back seat."

"Well, stop sounding off then."

"There's the sign!" yelled Clock excitedly.

He pointed; and sure enough, there was a huge sign almost over their heads, where they could dimly make out the words "Sens Unique" and an arrow pointing. They turned into this road gleefully, expecting any minute to run into the town. Good humor was restored, and their troubles assumed microscopic size again.

"Did you think to look in the gas tank?" asked Keith. "How do we know there's any gas left to take us any further?"

Dull silence. Thus Romeo—

"Well, if you ain't the original crape-hanger!"

"I think he's a Jonah," said Clock. "I always thought so. I know he is. He's got it writ all over him."

"What good would it do to look in the tank?" asked Rand.

"If it's empty we can't get any more, and we'd just have that much more to worry about. We'll know when it's empty. All we've got to do is get out and walk. You needn't be afraid of this can's running after the gas is gone. We can just leave it and go our way, and not care if it stays here till it rots."

They came to a second sign, which pointed to the left, and to the left they went. In a surprizingly short space of time they arrived at another road fork. To the left ran a dim road and to the right another. The road they were on ended abruptly. They groaned. There was an M. P. at the fork; they could see where his brassard pulled in the sleeve of his left arm. They groaned again.

"Now what the —— is this!"

There was a sign at the entrance to each road. Both of them said "Sens Unique," and both pointed with an arrow, one to the right and one to the left.

"I knew we were on the wrong road," said Keith.

Rand turned around in his seat.

"You're such a wise guy," he said, "suppose you put us right."

"I'll go ask the M. P."

He clambered from the car and crossed to where the policeman stood. From in back of the car came the tramp of feet and the splashing of horses' hoofs, creaking of harness and the soft jingle of trace-chain and the *bump-bump* of carriages.

"There's a column coming along in back of us," said Romeo. "Let's move out the way."

"Yes," agreed Rand. "And let's leave that —— of a Keith for the Jonah he is. I hope they hang him."

He pressed his foot on the pedal, and the car roared away down the left-hand road. Keith shouted excitedly at them as they went by, but they paid him no heed.

"Probably both roads go to the town," said Rand, "so it doesn't make any difference which one we take."

Quite suddenly they found themselves in a village. A wagon-train was halted there, all wrapped up in itself and snarled together so that one could not tell which was the head and which was the tail. The shadow of the houses lay on the road, so that the first the three knew of disaster was a heavy thud and the sudden stopping of the car. There was a squeal of pain and then a sound as if some one were attacking the motor with a hammer. *Crash!* went the lights; *crash!* the mudguard, *crash! Crash! Crash!* on the wreckage. Shouts and profanity.

"——!" cried Rand, "What have I hit?"

The methodical hammering continued. From above the car came words that are not known to many men, only to mule-skinners, packers and *cargadores* of long service. The gist of the remarks was that it would be well for them to get their car away from some one's swing team; and what did they mean by running down honest mules?

"Grab that —— —— jug-heads' bridle, can't you?" yelled Rand. "He's kicking the car all to——!"

"Back up the car!" roared the mule-skinner. "Get that blue-bellied, rotten-gutted road-louse out of theah! Which if I dared come down off this heah seat without them —— runnin' to Belgium, I'd surah than —— massacree somebody."

"Let's go! Let's go!" cried Romeo. "The whole wagon train'll be on our necks in a minute."

"I've killed the —— engine. Jump out, will you, Clock, and give it a twist?"

"Yeh! An' have that jar-head pound the —— outta me! I'm goin' to get out, but I'm goin' to walk."

An officer arrived. Language flowed freely. The mule was inspected and found to be unhurt. The auto was rather frayed. None of the damage was serious, except a hole in the radiator, from which rusty water gushed like blood from a wound. More officers gathered and demanded to know by what authority the road was blocked by the wagon-train. A column of infantry arrived, and when they had gone, the officer of the wagon-train moved out his men and paid no more heed to those in the flivver. They could hear the mule-skinner still giving an oration on motor vehicles for some time after the train had faded into the darkness.

"Now what?" asked Clock.

"We must be pretty near the town," said Rand. "This isn't it, because it's too small. Maybe if you'd ride on the hood and keep pouring water into the radiator, we can make out to get there without walking. You and Romeo can take turns."

"What yuh goin' to pour it out of; your hat?"

"No. I swiped a pail from one of the wagons while the argument was going on. I thought we might need it before we got through."

Clock thought deeply. He had no great longing to perch himself on the hood on that car, where he would get the full benefit of any further collisions; but on the other hand, though they surely had not far to go, it was still too far to walk, and it would be most unpleasant wandering around those dark roads under the stars.

"Give us the bucket," he said, and climbed up over the broken mud-guard.

They went off then, with Clock acting in the double capacity of water-tender and lookout.

"There's the sign" he cried once. "Turn to the right."

They turned and sped off once more.

Strangely enough, they met few troops since they had left the town except at cross-roads where they would be held up sometimes as long as twenty minutes while a column went by.

"I'll say there's a party on," remarked Romeo after a long line of light tanks had gone by. "Did yuh ever see such a gang of soldiers in your life?"

"I guess there's going to be a big scrap around Verdun. We're in back of there now. I heard that we only took over this sector from the French last week. Have you noticed the old stables and barracks where they kept troops during the big drive in 1916?"

"Hey!" called Clock. "I ain't gonna sit here any more. There's steam comin' out of this thing, and I'm gettin' all hot water."

It was clear that the plan of pouring water in the radiator to compensate for that which escaped through the leak would not succeed. While they still thought on this the car sputtered slightly and stopped.

"Get out, Romeo; get out, and let's look at the tank."

The tank gave forth a hollow sound while they were unscrewing the cover, and a stick thrust in came up dry.

"Now we got to walk," remarked Clock—rather unnecessarily, the other two thought.

There was no way to go but down the road, so they set off wordlessly to see what was at the end of it. After a half-hour's walking they came into another village.

"We'll ask here how far we've got to go," said Rand.

"The —— we will," muttered Romeo gloomily. "We been here before. This is the place the mule kicked the car to bits."

"—— if it ain't," said Clock. "I remember that house there—the white one that shows up so plain."

They halted, while utter, blank despair took possession of their souls. It was growing cold, and the night was far advanced. Clouds had shut out the stars, and one could smell rain approaching.

Two mounted men came clattering through the gloom. They drew rein as they came to the three.

"Where youse guys goin'?" inquired one of the riders.

Clock jumped and made a slight movement of his hand.

"Careful!" barked the second rider. "I'll make a lead mine outta you in a pig's whisper!"

"Stick em up, buddies," said the first speaker. "Tell me, where youse goin'?"

"We're lookin' for our outfit," said Romeo. "What the ——'s it to yuh?"

"Let's take 'em in," said the other rider. "They're too fresh to be walkin' around loose."

"Sure enough. Move out, youse, an' keep them lunch-hooks up good and high."

They went a short distance to a great stone building, with "Auberge—Logements" painted in huge letters on the wall. The two horsemen turned them over to a man armed with a rifle, who ushered them into the building.

The three were in what had once been the common room of an inn. Some soldiers, fully armed, were sleeping on benches around the walls, and a sergeant sat at a table in a corner reading *La Vie Parisienne* by the light of a lantern. It was not necessary to look around and observe that all these men wore the red arm-band to have it brought home to the three wanderers that they had been taken by the police. The sergeant was very terse.

"Got a pass?"

"No," said Rand, who appointed himself spokesman.

"What yuh doin' roaming around the roads then?"

"We're looking for our regiment."

"What outfit is it?"

Rand told him. The sergeant consulted a list he had on the desk.

"An' how did yuh come to get lost from it?"

Rand explained that, giving a complete history of their wanderings, minus, of course, the theft of the car. The sergeant seemed impressed.

"What town did you say they was at?"

"They're at a place called Sens Unique."

"Oh, they are, are they? Well, I'll tell you birds where you're at. You're at a place called Out of Luck."

He motioned to the man that had brought them in.

"Take their putts and shoestrings, an' put 'em away."

The men put their leggings and shoestrings in a box in the corner full of similar articles and were led out of a door at the back of the house, across a court and up-stairs into a hay-loft, where they were told they might make themselves comfortable with the blanket apiece that the guards gave them.

So then, once more, to the walled court and the line of prisoners waiting with their shovels and brooms and picks for the sergeant to come and send them out to work; to the great stone building with the little door in it through which the three men had gone.

The three of them, Clock and Romeo and Rand, wondering as to their fate and just a little apprehensive, were shoved into the same room where they had interviewed the sergeant the night before. There was an officer there now, and he beckoned to them.

"Put on your leggings," said he. "Your lieutenant has come for you. The next time, don't try to be so wise when the police ask you a few questions,. If I'd been the sergeant last night I'd banged you over the head with a gun."

The three put on their putts and laced up their shoes in silence. Two men came in the front door—the executive officer of A Battery, and an enlisted man.

"We-e-e-ll, for ——'s sake!" gasped Clock, and the other two looked up.

There with a cigaret sagging from his lips and that same full-house look of vacancy on his ugly face, stood Keith.

"I brought the lieutenant down after you," said he. "I knew you'd be picked up before long."

"The —— you did," said Rand.

The exec signed a receipt for them, and they all went out into the open air.

"You men go back to camp with Keith," he said. "I've got some errands to do."

"Yessir," said they.

So they went off, walking four abreast, their troubles at an end, the outfit found, themselves free once more. The old air tasted good, even after their short period of confinement.

"Tell us," said Clock, "how'd you find th' outfit?"

"You remember the place we come to where the road forked, and there was a sign pointed both ways, and I got out to ask the M. P. the way?"

"Yeh, yeh, we remember."

"Yeh, remember there was a column come up in back of you, and you had to move out to let it go by?"

"Yeh."

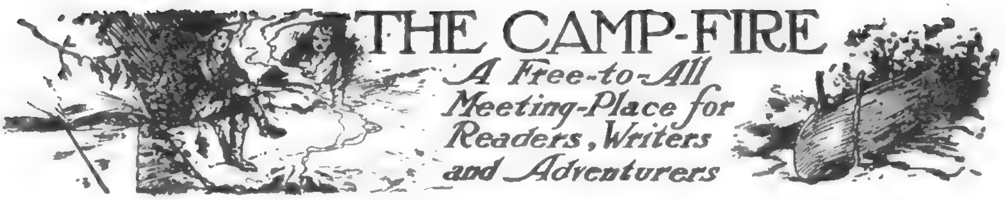
"That was our outfit. The old man was ridin' at the head of it; and I knew that old camel he rides in a minute, even if it was dark. Then I told him you guys was running round the country in circles, and he sent me down with the exec this morning to see if you'd been picked up."

They went merrily on, discussing the place where they had been locked up and meditating on the fate of the officer they had seen imprisoned there. After a mile or so they came to a place where a narrow road turned off through some woods. There was their old friend, the black sign, with the letters "Sens Unique," and the arrow pointing down the road. Clock, who was a little in advance, turned down it.

"Hey!" called Keith. "That ain't the road."

"Sure it is," said Clock. "Look at the sign. That's the town we was tryin' to find all last night."

"No, it ain't," said Keith, his face as placid as ever. "The M. P. told me what that meant last night. That ain't a town, that sign means, 'One Way Road.'"



THE CAMP-FIRE

A Free-to-All Meeting-Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

SOME very interesting testimony as to the manner in which the famous Bully Hayes "passed out:"

Campbell's Bay, Quebec, Canada.

There was a Camp-Fire talk in which Bully Hayes figures; and in Camp-Fire notes in back numbers several references are made to him. One of these seemed doubtful how "finis" was written to his career. I had the story of his finish from the last white man who saw Hayes alive.

I WAS in Australia from 1885 to 1907 and for most of that time was in the employ of a large mining firm in the Charters Towers Goldfield, Queensland, whose business was largely general management of mines, mine reports and valuation, etc. There were two mines on the Ravenswood Goldfield, about twenty-five miles apart, owned by English capital and under control of this firm. It was my duty for a couple of years in the middle '90's to visit these mines monthly and take the gold cleaned up into the bank in the town of Ravenswood, sign checks for the men working at the mines and inspect all workings and make a report for the London offices. I had to spend two nights at Ravenswood and met there a man named Andrew Gilles Peace, a Newfoundlander by birth, whose whole family had migrated to New Zealand some forty years before in their own schooner. Being Canadian born myself, on the other side of the world a Newfoundland man seemed to be a neighbor and we had an hour or two together on nearly every visit.

PEACE was then about sixty and I about half his age, but he was most excellent company. He had been over twenty years in the island trade in the employ of a New Zealand trading company and had stories to tell of Bully Hayes and island life better than anything I ever saw in print. For some years he had been manager for the trading company on an island, the name of which has slipped my memory. Hayes made a call there very shortly before his end came, in fact, his last visit to port. In those days a manager down there required a full of cargo of sand aboard to last, and Peace looked like a man who had a full bill of lading of that article, and Hayes always treated him respectfully.

On this occasion Hayes had no white man in his crew. The acting mate was a half-caste and had a very pretty half-caste wife with him. A couple of years or so after the death of Hayes, Peace met the ex-mate, I think in the Fijis, and got the story of the end from him.

It appears that Hayes had been drinking very heavily after leaving the last port and took a notion that he ought to have the mate's wife. He knocked the mate cold with the butt of his gun and took the wife into his own cabin. When the mate came to, he naturally planned how to get Hayes. All firearms aboard were in Hayes' cabin, so the best he could do was a heavy wooden club, which he placed handy. Hayes always came on deck with his hand on the revolver, and the mate was in despair. At last he got a scuffle up among the native crew early one morning, as he knew that would bring Hayes on deck in a hurry. The mate had his club, and waited back of the companionway till Hayes was just where he wanted him, and brought down the club and knocked him out. For fear he might recover, the mate at once hoisted the body overboard. That finished Bully Hayes.

The mate was never penalized, and when the story became known, many of the traders said he ought to have been given a medal and pension for removing such a vicious scourge from the South Seas. A. G. Peace died before I left Australia in 1907 and, as far as I know, his tale has never been in the hands of a printer.—JOHN D. MACFORLANE.

FOLLOWING our new Camp-Fire custom, Edgar Franklin Wittmack, who painted the cover of this issue, rises to introduce himself.

As Ina Clare said in that famous play, "The Gold Diggers"—"It all started when I was born," and as far as I am concerned it has been going on ever since. I first disturbed the quiet of the world at Central Park West, New York, and so never had a chance to come from a farm to New York and study art. Life as a boy was one series of mishaps that go to make a good steady American, only I have not steadied by a darn sight yet.

SOMEHOW I grew up all at once and found mymyself in an advertising firm emptying the trash-basket. Then and there I knew I was a real artist by the manner in which I could throw away rejected art work and not shed a tear—I've been doing it ever since.

At an early date some one discovered I could paint marines (I mean water, not our famous soldiers); since then it's been a battle to sell anything else.

My chief aim at the present writing is to guess what in thunder Mr. Hoffman wants for a cover design and take it from me I sure do manage to think up a lot of stuff he sure does not want—incidentally am sending a cover to him now with this letter—maybe he's had a good breakfast and it won't be returned.

To sum up, I am one of the few original New Yorkers, am 5 feet 9 inches, wear rubber-tired glasses and something on my upper lip that my friends after three years of effort can not as yet call a mustache. Won the war at Camp Lewis, Washington, and have been alive ever since.—WITTMACK.

THE matter of enclosing postage when you ask some one to *give* you some information. When a man fails to enclose it what the victim resents is not the expense of a few cents but the attitude of the man who asks—the everlasting nerve, injustice and lack of consideration in a fellow who expects another man to *pay* for the privilege of doing him a favor. And isn't a self-addressed envelope a thing that should be enclosed for the same reason?

The following letter is from a man, not connected with our "A A" or our magazine, who simply and quite rightly refuses to answer any letters of inquiry without return postage enclosed. But see to how much trouble he is ready to go for an inquirer who does show this ordinary sign of appreciating the fact that he's asking a favor.

I for one think that "Ask Adventure" Philadelphia should have printed in bold type at top of page "If you want an answer send postage," as that would probably make a few of the non-thinking class seeking free knowledge see that it was at least worth "postage" to find out.

MY CORRESPONDENCE takes in the "four parts of the globe" and when one receives from ten to fifty letters a day—most of them of no benefit to me but from people wanting to know things—can you tell me why I should pay the postage? I don't. I don't answer. So have no kick about postage.

Some six months ago I received a letter from a native of China. Mark you this—he inclosed postage. Now I know nothing of his language, so I called on the Chinese around the block. He could not help me to translate and I asked several people if they knew where I could have it translated. One friend said "he would take me to his priest and see if he could help me." We called and the Priest told me that he was acquainted with a Chinese priest in China and he sent the letter to the priest in China, who translated it into Latin. The American priest translated it into English. I answered it in English and gave it to the Catholic priest who translated it into Latin and sent it to the Chinese priest who translated it into that language and mailed it to the other Chinese. I was afterward told that I should have taken it to the Jesuit church as it was likely some one connected with that church could have translated it for me.

Now the point I wish to bring out is that the Chinese sent postage.

This "No Postage" sign should also be included to embrace all letters sent to any of your writers when an answer is expected.

Now as to those readers who rush "to take pen in hand" when they think some writer has made a big blunder in stating a certain event or description. . . .—"WILLIAM JOSEPH."

Well, what he says about them—about those who do so without being really sure they know more than the writer they criticize—is so blamed sincere in its expression that I'm not printing that part of his letter, though not because I don't sympathize with his point of view. He closes by suggesting that they think the matter over carefully, make sure it's the writer who is wrong, not they themselves and "then write a dignified letter asking about it."

He makes a similar plea for the editor and his mistakes, real and fancied, for which I am heartily grateful, asks all readers to remember that our magazine isn't anti any nation or religion, but plain pro-American, and ends with a plea for immigrants which I'm omitting because it has already been presented and answered. But there's one bit from that part of his letter that must be passed on *verbatim:*

> "Suppose I told you that the first battle of the Revolution was fought in New York, or that the Revolution started over a religious question. I would be called a liar, but it is the truth."

I'm ashamed to say I don't know. How about the rest of you?

A WOMAN'S letter in response to some of our Camp-Fire pleas for national preparedness and against the anti-weapon campaign. She is willing to have her name published, but prefers not. As it is a woman speaking of her family's private affairs as well as of duty to country and the cause of peace, her preference should be honored.

I wish there were about fifty million women like her in this country.

> Corona, New York.
>
> I am the mother of six sons, the eldest being seventeen, so I was spared the heart-racking anxieties of the last war. But the next will involve me, my home, my family. I agree with you that we should be ready; I agree with you that it is not safe to face gangsters unarmed. I am sure the women of America are interested in this terrible topic.
>
> I FIRMLY believe that military service in our country should be *compulsory*—that every boy over sixteen should know something of military life. We are not, as you so truly say, looking for trouble. We won't have to look before long—but if every young man was ready, if every channel was cleaned up so that when war came we would be able to defend our country, we will never fear war. It is a splendid thing to die for one's native land, but there ought to be no unnecessary deaths!
>
> The ignorant mother who sits beside her sick child's bed and allows this child to die because she doesn't know, can't know, won't know what to do to help it wastes that life, doesn't she? So with us. We are wasting time, and time is life.
>
> Our women, too! From sixteen on they should be organized and taught their duties in time of war.—ALSO PRO-AMERICAN.

FROM a letter in reply to mine asking permission to publish her letter:

> May I add that my husband and myself are in utter agreement on this point of preparedness—that my eighteen-year-old nephew—I have four nephews in the house with me, as well as my own six boys, making ten in all!—was at Marion Barracks during August for a month's intensive training and, please God, next year some of the other boys will go also to one of our military camps for this training, which we deem very necessary and very useful. When I add that we are not wealthy people, that we are all working just as hard as we can to bring up and give a decent education to these boys, you will realize that we have made and are willing to make sacrifices.
>
> Sacrifice! Preparedness! Do 'em now!

DON'T forget that until the latter part of March I'll be out of the country and so naturally shan't be able to answer correspondence addressed to me.

SOMETHING more about the notorious Bender family and their fate:

> Kenosha, Wisconsin.
>
> I have just read an account of the Bender family. I will give an account of what a fellow gave me, some 12 years ago in Columbus, Kan., not so very far from the Bender family outrages.
>
> I BOARDED with my informant for some six weeks, and am inclined to believe what he told me in the matter. He said quite a few nasty rumors were coming in about people disappearing and it was finally decided the Bender family was to blame. The vigilance committee decided to put an end to it, so they went out and gathered them in. Just lined them up and filled them up with lead. Kate, the one that had the name of doing most of the dirty work, was defiant up to the last. She just stood up and cursed the vigilance committee boys until she went down. My informant did not care to talk much about it, but I said we had had many conflicting stories about their capture and I would like to get the facts. He said they did quite a bit of investigating around the Bender buildings and found many graves besides some bodies in the cellar.—JAS. H. BIRCHARD.

OLD-TIMERS at Camp-Fire will remember Major (then Captain) W. Robert Foran of our writers' brigade, a charter member of the New York Adventurers Club and founder of the Chicago Adventurers Club. I hadn't seen him since 1914, for he went back to England for the Great War, served in the Mesopotamian campaign and of recent years has been editor of the Rangoon, India, *Times*. But we've kept in touch by correspondence and last week he walked into the office and we renewed old times. He's in this country in charge of a motion-picture enterprize backed by various British army officers and explorers. There will be many old friends to greet him again.

He tells me there's a flourishing Adventurers Club in Los Angeles now and I know there's a recent and very successful one in San Francisco.

IN ACCORDANCE with Camp-Fire custom Harry Simon rises to introduce himself on the occasion of his first story in our magazine:

U.S.S. Altair, San Diego, California

I've been in messes, scrapes and jams, but real adventure, it seems, like a ship in a fog, usually passes me by unnoticed. Perhaps it's just that I don't recognize it. What may strike one as being only a disagreeable bit of work, an extra-rotten job, a strenuous effort or just plain —— at the time of occurrence, often in perspective, when looking back at it, takes on all the spice and glamour of adventure.

I served in infantry and machine-gun outfits during the war, having enlisted a month after we got into it, an undersized kid crazy for action. But I missed out on the big adventure. I never saw France. In Texas mostly. One of the principal diversions of the machine-gun outfit while at Fort Sam Houston may be inferred from the title which was popularly bestowed upon us by reason of it, namely "The Bay Rum Battalion." Not that lemon extract was barred. Officially we were the 27th M. G. Battalion, which designation was later changed to the 29th when we moved to Camp Funston, Kansas. A rough and ready bunch. Surely, some must be gathered around Camp-Fire now. I was discharged at Camp Funston about ten weeks aiter the war ended.

I tried my hand then in ship-yard, office, factory, farm. Going from one job to another. Always restless, always discontented. The jobs I didn't quit I was fired from.

One day, acting on impulse, I presented myself at a recruiting station and was shipped into the Navy. And here I am now, still restless, still vaguely discontented, with two years and a butt to do.

The conditions depicted on the "*Alaric*" in "The Watered Mold" has its actual counterpart on the *Altair*. The accident of the falling king-boom happened on the *Altair*, only it took place while we were anchored off Balboa. It happened in the same way as described in the story, while a motor sailer was being hoisted aboard, with corresponding injuries to two seamen. We never lost a doughnut raft overboard, but we did lose a life-buoy on our trip around to San Diego from New York. The ship was stopped in an effort to locate the buoy, but it was lost and we proceeded on our way.—Harry Simon.

SINCE the above, the following letter came to us from Mr. Simon:

U. S. S. Altair.

The proofs of "The Watered Mold" arrived in this afternoon's mail and I was going through them when an explosion occurred in the foundry on our ship. As a coincidence, though unconnected with any mold, I'll admit it seems kind of made to order.

IT HAPPENED while a brass heat was being run off. Rain had been coming down heavily for an hour or so after one o'clock—in fact, it was still drizzling—and quite a little water had collected on the deck of the foundry. Sand had been spread over this water and the crucible, containing about 250 pounds of melted metal heated to 2300° Fahrenheit more or less, lowered from the furnace to the sand. The explosion took place when a molder dropped a piece of zinc into the flaming mass.

There were five men in the foundry at the time, but as the crucible broke to the starboard side, only two of the men were really burnt enough to lay them up, the others being blistered very slightly or not at all. Both of the injured have a foot apiece swathed in bandages and several strips of plaster on their bodies. The doctor wanted to turn them into bunks in the sick bay but they both balked.

They were cheerful enough this evening, kidding each other when I was down there. The lesser burnt of the two admitted he tried to climb the bulkhead in his frenzy when he felt the first hot splash against his foot. And the other, who had thrown the zinc into the crucible just before it blew up and seemed to get quite a laugh out of the way he slipped through the rungs of the make-shift wooden ladder in his effort to climb it in nothing flat, was of the opinion that his shipmate might have been speeding through Mexico by that hour of the evening if the foundry had been located out in the open.

THE explosion was probably due to the damp deck and the fact that the zinc may have been cold and wet. Although the crucible offered little resistence to the force of the explosion, breaking easily and allowing most of the metal to run out on the sand, bits of the melten metal were flung to the evaporator deck thirty feet above. This is the first accident of its kind we've had on board.—Harry Simon.

A COMRADE called my attention to a review by Stuart Henry in the *International Book Review* for November, 1923, of Emerson Hough's "North of 36" and protests vigorously against Mr. Henry's indictment of Hough as ignorant of real conditions in the early West and failing to present in his book a true picture of that West. As the comrade in question is himself familiar with that part of our history, his protest carries weight with it. He asks that the question be put up to Camp-Fire, among whom are numbered many who know Western history, many, indeed, who helped make it. As this comrade realized, there is probably no other gathering on earth with so many who can speak with authority on this subject.

I am glad to put the case: Did Emerson Hough know the West of which he wrote? Did he portray it faithfully in his books? Does Mr. Henry, in his criticisms, evidence a superior knowledge?

To these I'd like to add another question: Does either of them show a more detailed and accurate knowledge of the old West than does Hugh Pendexter? Since the point has been raised, of all writers who use the early West as material for stories or articles, which ones draw accurate, reliable pictures and which do not? I do not mean only those who write for this magazine, but all writers, living or dead. It is important that Americans should know which authors can be trusted to give historically faithful pictures. There is no tribunal so competent to give judgment as Camp-Fire, for to Camp-Fire have naturally gravitated a large proportion of the men who helped make the chapter of history in question or grew up in the West during its making.

IT IS to these judges our comrade is appealing and, for the sake of guiding the general reading public in choosing the authors who can and do give reliable pictures of the early West, it would seem their very serious duty to give their carefully considered judgment. It is up to every "old-timer" to do his part, particularly those who lived in the West before or during the sixties. For a generation or more there has been much complaint and argument as to which authors drew reliable fiction pictures of the old West. It's high time the question was settled.

IN YOUR letters please state first of all just what are your qualifications for judging. State how long and between what years you lived in the West. Give a general, brief outline of your experience and activities there. Then your opinions.

As the past has shown, there are among us those who have written histories or made thorough and scholarly studies of one or more phases of American history. These, too, should be heard from, prefacing their opinion with the facts that warrant them in giving opinions. These, moreover can give our inquiry broader scope. While we're investigating let us have their opinions on the relative historical reliability of all authors who attempt to paint fiction pictures of any chapters of the history of any parts of this country or of Canada. That, too, is very much needed information.

Here is the pertinent part of Mr. Henry's review:

> Yet, after all merited praise is awarded, may one not protest against the giving-out of the idea that such narratives reflect the real history and life of the West that was? As one who knew intimately the scene and period of Mr. Hough's story, I wish to express my regret that our school children are deriving their notions of the Western pioneers and their times from such extravaganzas.
>
> HISTORICAL writers, responsible students, the few remaining frontiersmen, are beginning to protest. The Pioneers of America, Inc., has recently been organized for the purpose of calling a halt to such pseudo-pictures or histories, with their misguiding information, superheated imaginings, spurious hues, spread before Americans for profit. Are not our people entitled to know what those progenitors of the West were really like; how their deeper problems were solved; how the foundations of our mighty Western Empire were actually laid; how the trick was turned of transforming the forbidding Great American Desert into a rich, inviting farm land?
>
> The trouble is that few of those pioneers now survive. Almost no one now lives who saw the Chisholm Trail or that early village of Abilene, Kansas, once the famous cattle emporium. And very few of those roving inhabitants of half a century ago could write down what they experienced or knew. Rumors, yarns, lies, soared about. Every time a tenderfoot appeared, such as the author of "North of 36," who did not go West until that frontier epoch had ended, he was filled with amazing tales designed to flabbergast green Easterners. Thus the fantastic legends have swollen into colossal and money-coining proportions and been made to seem true. Wild romance revels in a full fling.
>
> THE prefatory note, as well as the jacket, of Mr. Hough's book declares that the author's aim is to reconstitute the coloring, the aspect, the "feel" of actual existence—to pen the essential truth; that his picture of the time is authentic and dependable. May one venture to test these statements?
>
> Mr. Hough says that he "has followed or crossed the old cattle (Chisholm) trail at perhaps fifty points between the Gulf and our northern boundaries." So has any old Western commercial traveler. No cattle trails, however, extended from the Gulf to Canada or within six hundred miles of the Canadian line. There was no need that they should. The parent Chisholm itself only reached from the Red River to the center of Kansas, where it connected with a railroad. The railways, of course, were not yet extended to the Pacific at that time.
>
> WHILE the author, whose vivid imagination projects things into vast, vague, misleading outlines, avoids in general precise facts or dates, he centers the attention on July 4, 1867, as the final turning-point of his cattle-drive story. But is his picture "authentic and dependable?"
>
> In the first place, the language he makes his characters use is a curious mixture of what was then current and what is now current. Twentieth-century slang and colloquialisms are wedged in plentifully, and at once disconcert a pioneer of the region. Again, as an authority, on Western cattle life, Mr. Hough errs strangely in representing that so large a herd as forty-five hundred could be driven over the Chisholm Trail in '67. That was a very exceptional number for any year under the best conditions. One thousand would have been quite enough for verisimilitude. And how could such a big drove be financed by a "dead-broke"

youthful lady? Only experienced drovers with considerable money or credit could get through.

And no women could be found on that trail. It had no place for them. Nor were there, in '67, any prostitutes in Abilene. One woman did live on the outskirts—a pious and worthy Methodist, far from the corrupt type set forth. Abilene had no dance-halls, no brass band, no bridge, no hotel, no livery stables, only one or two saloons instead of several. It was a hamlet of perhaps ten mud huts.

NOR did the Fourth of July celebration take place until after the cattle men left—years later. To represent Texans as dominating in such a festivity is to mistake the temper of the Texans of that day. They considered themselves Texans, not Americans. They saw no excuse for recognizing the glorious Fourth. The Alamo provided the single historic date they worshiped, the Lone Star supplied their only emblem, and they had little use even for the Stars and Bars.

The one historical character appearing by name in "North of 36" is Wild Bill Hickok. But Wild Bill was not marshal in '67, nor was he in the village then. Abilene had no marshal. The picture that the author draws of him here is suited to youths eager to become gallant wild men out West; but Wild Bill was not that kind of man, nor did he later lead any such career in the steer metropolis. (Steer, not cow, was the generic term used.) Hickok passed his time gambling in his saloon headquarters and manifested no interest in laws or jails. Instead of being sentimental about his white wife somewhere back East, if she existed, he dwelt in marital bliss with a squaw.

I WOULD be ungracious, to enlarge on these discrepancies. Danger to historical truth, to living facts, lies inevitably in the path of rapid romantic writing. Gloss and glamour can not well be harmonized with the grim life of those wiry frontiersmen of the cattle camp and "prairie schooner." They were gaunt, homely, hungry, leading a rawbone and rawhide existence. Many excellent traits had they, but their life was necessarily hard, even to sordidness. They and their few women-folk furnished figures too weazened, weary, forlorn, for the buoyant pages of adolescent pageantry. They would not feel at home in the West that Mr. Hough depicts.

As a romance for the unsophisticated, "North of 36" is of the best prevailing order. As anything like true history, however, one may regretfully confess that it is—to employ the term used by one of our popular Presidential aspirants—very like "bunk." The time will come, no doubt, when serious historical romancers, patient investigators, will, with the gift for the truth that is stranger than fiction, depict more adequately the wild west of our former Great American Desert.

It would seem only fair to give an outline of the lives of both Mr. Henry and Emerson Hough as stated in "Who's Who in America," so far as data in any way suggesting Western experience, or the lack of it, are concerned:

Stuart Henry—Born, Clifton Springs, N. Y. 1860. A. B. University of Kansas, 1881; A.M. 1893; studied 6 years in Germany, Italy and at the Sorbonne, Paris. Formerly secretary and treasurer, Colorado Loan and Trust Company and numerous allied irrigation and land cos., Denver, and pres. N. Y. State Security Co., New York; now vice-president Autographic Register Company, Hoboken, N. J. Author of various books none of whose titles suggests anything connected with the West.

Emerson Hough—Born, Newton, Ia., 1857. A.B. State University of Ia., 1880. Traveled over the wildest portions of the West; explored the Yellowstone Park, winter 1895, traveling on ski. The act of Congress protecting the buffalo was due to this trip. President, Society of Midland Authors. Residence, Chicago. Author of some two dozen fiction books, most of them dealing with the West. Emerson Hough died within the year.

These outlines, of course, furnish no conclusive evidence as to comparative knowledge, but at least give us a basis of facts in each case.

IF YOU yourself can give no opinion based on direct knowledge, won't you make it a particular point to get a letter of opinion from every person whose opinion you know to be worth having? It is a matter well worth working for. Fiction shapes a people's opinions and understanding to a far greater extent than is commonly realized. It is of the utmost importance that there should be every possible guide-post to show people which fiction is trustworthy and which is not. Let us give to the guide-posts we are erecting every ounce of sound authority that we can produce.

SERVICES TO OUR READERS

Lost Trails, for finding missing relatives and friends, runs in alternate issues from "Old Songs That Men Have Sung."

Old Songs That Men Have Sung, a section of "Ask Adventure," runs in alternate issues from "Lost Trails."

Camp-Fire Stations: explanation in the first and third issues of each month. Full list in first issue of each month.

Various Practical Services to Any Reader: Free Identification Card in eleven languages (metal, 25 cents); Mail Address and Forwarding Service; Back Issues Exchanged; Camp-Fire Buttons, etc., runs in the last issue of each month.

VARIOUS PRACTICAL SERVICES TO ANY READER

These services of *Adventure*, mostly free, are open to any one. They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we ask in return only that you **read and observe the simple rules,** thus saving needless delay and trouble for us. The whole spirit of the magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we can help we're ready and willing to try. **Remember: Magazines are made up ahead of time. Allow for two or three months between sending and publication.**

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address, (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription, each printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure*, New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one or two friends, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

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A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying.*

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Back Issues of *Adventure*

The Boston Magazine Exchange, 24 T Wharf, Boston, Mass., can supply Adventure *back through* 1918, *and occasional copies before that.*

WILL SELL: All issues of 1922 and 1923. What offers?—Address J. L. McClish, Bertram, Texas.

WILL SELL: One hundred and eighty-eight perfect copies. Beginning with No. 1, Vol. 1, up to, and including, Dec. 30th, 1921. Not a single copy missing. Thirty dollars takes lot. Will not sell odd copies.—Address J. Reischman, 2634 Canton St., Chicago, Ill.

WILL SELL: Sept., Nov., Dec., 1911; Aug., Mid-Sept., 1st Oct., 1st Nov., 1917; 1st Jan. to Mid-Feb., Mid-Apl., Mid-May to 1st Sept., 1st Nov., and Mid-Dec., 1918; Mid-March to Mid-Dec., 1919; 1st Jan., to Mid-Apl., 1st June to 1st Aug., and Mid-Nov., 1920. Fifty-six issues in all. Five dollars and sixty cents for lot.—Address P. O. Box 56, Nogales, Arizona.

WILL SELL: June 10th., Nov. 20th., and all Dec., 1922; 1st Oct., 1920; May, all June, July 30th, all Aug., and Sept. 10th, 1923. Fifteen cents each, or two dollars and fifteen cents for lot. This does not include postage.—Address Leon Frederic, 912 E. 45th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscript. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessary to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. Use fiction of almost any length; under 3,000 welcomed.

Camp-Fire Stations

Our Camp-Fire is extending its Stations all over the world. Any one belongs who wishes to. Any member desiring to meet those who are still hitting the trails may maintain a Station in his home or shop where wanderers may call and receive such hospitality as the Keeper wishes to offer. The only requirements are that the Station display the regular sign, provide a box for mail to be called for and keep the regular register book and maintain his Station in good repute. Otherwise Keepers run their Stations to suit themselves and are not responsible to this magazine or representative of it. List of Stations and further details are published in the Camp-Fire in the first issue of each month. Address letters regarding stations to J. Cox.

Camp-Fire Buttons

To be worn on lapel of coat by members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to. Enameled in dark colors representing earth, sea and sky, and bears the numeral 71—the sum of the letters of the word Camp-Fire valued according to position in the alphabet. Very small and inconspicuous. Designed to indicate the common interest which is the only requisite for membership in Camp-Fire and to enable members to recognize each other when they meet in far places or at home. Twenty-five cents, post-paid, anywhere.

When sending for the button enclose a strong, self-addressed, *unstamped* envelope.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Missing Friends or Relatives

(*See Lost Trails in next issue*)

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied.

Addresses

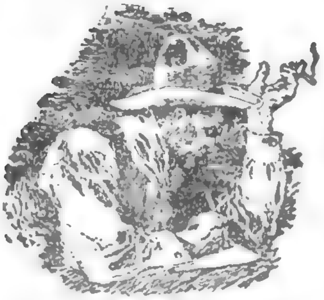
Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(*See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure."*)

Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.



QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached,* are enclosed. (See footnote at bottom of page.) Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

Please Note: **To avoid using so much needed space each issue for standing matter and to gain more space for the actual meat of "Ask Adventure" the full statement of its various sections and of "Lost Trails" will be given only in alternate issues. In other issues only the bare names of the sections will be given, inquirers to get exact fields covered and names and addresses from full statement in alternate issues. Do *not* write to the magazine, but to the editors of the sections at their home addresses.**

1—3. The Sea. In Three Parts
4, 5. Islands and Coasts. In Two Parts
6, 7. New Zealand and the South Sea Islands. In Two Parts
8. Australia and Tasmania
9. Malaysia, Sumatra and Java
10. New Guinea
11. Philippine Islands
12. Hawaiian Islands and China
13. Japan
14—17. Asia. In Four Parts
18—25. Africa. In Eight Parts
26. Turkey and Asia Minor
27—29. Balkans. In Three Parts
30. Scandinavia
31. Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, Austria, Poland
32. Great Britian
33—35. South America. In Three Parts
36. Central America
37, 38. Mexico. In Two Parts
39—45. Canada. In Seven Parts
46. Alaska
47. Baffinland and Greenland
48—53. Western U. S. In Six Parts
54—57. Middle Western U. S. In Four Parts
58—63. Eastern U. S. In Six Parts
Radio
Mining and Prospecting
Weapons, Past and Present. In Three Parts
Salt and Fresh Water Fishing
Tropical Forestry
Aviation
Army Matters, United States and Foreign
American Anthropology North of Panama Canal
Standing Information

Personal

READERS have been asking for the autobiographies of "Ask Adventure" editors; and those staff members who believe that a few words about themselves will promote better acquaintanceship all around, are responding to the request. The order in which these autobiographies are printed doesn't signify anything. They are withdrawn from the file at random:

Feilding, New Zealand.

What, me? What have I done that I should be run into Who's Who? I've been "in perils oft"—who that has been a roundsman and a special writer on a city daily hasn't! But then from very childhood days I've been what the insurance folks call a risky life.

Born in the Isle of Man, that gem of independence set in the midst of the Irish Sea, and afterward transplanted across the way, into Cumberland, England, my folks very soon had to bring their son and heir overseas to save his life. That was fifty years ago, when there were windjammers only, and it took three months in a clipper ship to make the voyage from London docks to New Zealand. And we were only a couple of days out when we struck a big storm in the Bay of Biscay—in the midst of which behold the hope of the House of Mills being washed overboard! My father, a mighty man of valor in the water, went overboard and saved me.

That was some voyage, for when we were all on our way, adverse winds drove us down into the Region of Perpetual Snow, better known nowadays as Antarctica. Gee, but didn't we kids rejoice over the spouting whales and the immense icebergs!

Got my schooling and my trade as a printer in New Zealand. Have been in the midst of the inky way since I was thirteen years of age, and have been everything therein from devil to editor. I've won scoops and I've been scooped.

Came safely twice out of should-have-been-drowned episodes. I've got what you folks call a "baseball finger," got in an exhibition match in Wellington during the only year baseball flourished in New Zealand, and that was 'way back in 1890, when I captained the pennant team. Also in my salad days played representative cricket and football. Today, being classified amongst the has-beens, I play the calmly quiet game of lawn bowls as they play it in England, with the bias.

Have had the enjoyable privilege of two tours of Australia—four days' steaming from New Zealand—when President of the Australasian Country Press Association. Have been a writer on New Zealand and Pacific questions these thirty years, and feel it to be a pleasure and privilege to keep *Adventure* fans informed thereupon. And in connection therewith my record in "A. A." answers from the starting of the department (August, 1917) to date is 470.

Kia Ora.—TOM L. MILLS.

San Francisco, Calif.

I went "up there" with the Klondikers, after years of active boy and man work as an explorer and expert on outdoor life in the West here, during which I became an honorary member of many mountaineering and exploring societies. Then followed solid ten years, Summer and Winter, of traveling, exploring mining, surveying, engineering, business 'n' *every*thing in the country; and that was followed by about four years up there Summers only. Since—in the last ten years—I've kept pretty well posted through chains of personal contact, Geological Survey and other Governmental department bulletins and reports, and various other sources.

If my questioners were more specific they'd stump me on very local matters and force me to give up the job or get to investigating. I get by with myself by answering letters in bunches. The importunate—if there are any—have to wait, that's all. Isn't right, but best I can do. Couldn't get out the paraphernalia for a letter or two.

Want any more about me? Well, shoot, if you do. My real forte is rarely tested by the letters I get—the art and science of outdoor living and travel under rigidly difficult conditions.—T. S. SOLOMONS.

Corunna, Ont., Canada.

I went out to Portuguese East Africa for a well-known firm of London (Eng.) rubber brokers, who had a concession of nearly two hundred square miles in the Matadane country. I was in charge of the rubber production, and remained there for two years. The effects of fever compelled my return to Europe, and I was on the eve of returning to Africa when the Great War started.

I have traveled several times up and down the coast from Parapat to Lourenço Marques, visiting Quellemane, Beira, Inhambane and Bartalomew Diaz, but have never been as far inland as Senna and Tete. North of Beira there were no railroads, and I was located some five hundred miles north of the nearest, so most of my traveling was done in a *mackilla*.

The districts of Mozambique and Nyassa are still under military rule, as far as I know. They were when I was there.

I had considerable intercourse with the Portuguese officials—taxes, customs duties and various regulations, etc. When I left we had fifty thousand coconut-trees planted, and were experimenting in sisal. I made a special study of the natives, for I lived entirely by myself most of the time. My nearest white neighbor was forty miles away, and I was stationed at Mpago, eighty miles from headquarters. I had approximately twelve hundred natives in my jurisdiction and acted as judge, doctor and missionary for them. I have been on big-game hunts with two hundred and three hundred natives, but have never shot larger game than buck (water), and these were fairly plentiful. We had lions, but I never went out of my way to get them. Leopards were numerous, and many species of buck.

We did considerable trading in cotton goods, beads, soaps, etc., with the natives, buying some of the stuff from India and some from Manchester. We were also exporters of ebony wood.

I also lay claim to the fact that I installed the first steam plant for the treatment of wild rubber (*Landolphia Kirkii*). The whole of this plant, weighing many tons, with a twenty horse-power boiler, was carried and hauled overland four miles from the head waters of the Cocola Creek entirely by native labor. There are no horses or cattle in the district. I practically hewed the station out of the bush and erected the machinery.

The first day steam was turned on nearly three hundred natives arrived to view the proceedings. Every one hiked to the bush when the wheels started to move. Some went crazy, others laughed; but every one bolted and hid for some time. The firm were wise; they never included a steam whistle. One toot from that, and I think we would never have seen them again.

The natives on this concession numbered all told, six thousand, and prior to our arrival had not been placed under subjection by the Portuguese. Two years before I arrived, my predecessors had quite a hostile reception, for the territory was under the jurisdiction of a king named Kuropa, and it was only through his good offices that we could get established, and for some time afterward there was plenty of danger; but tact and due regard for their customs eventually smoothed things over.

With reference to the word "expert" I might possibly lay claim to this appellation when used in connection with native life, for I know it so well; and yet I had lots to learn, for just previous to my leaving for England I was under the spell of a witch-doctor who sought to get rid of me by means of a slow poison.

This is a small résumé of my African life, but which could be extended into a volume, more especially since I was off the beaten track of civilization for long months at a time.

Part of my early life was spent in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and California. Also know Mississippi and Louisiana, Colorado and Utah. In 1906 and '07 and '08 was assistant manager and later manager of the Foreign and Colonial Department of the Commercial Intelligence Bureau of London, Eng.—R. G. WARING.

Names and addresses of department editors and the exact field covered by each section are given in the next issue of the magazine. Do NOT write to the magazine itself.

The Great Questionnaire Mystery

AN INQUIRER wants to know about the second-hand *kyak* market in Dutch Harbor, the Summer temperature of Nome, polar-bear hunting in Bering Straits, and a number of other things pertaining to Alaska. But he carefully abstains from telling why he wants this information:

Question:—"Enclosed find stamp and return envelop. Would you be so kind as to answer the following questions:

Is it possible to secure canoes at Dutch Harbor? If not, what kind of small boats are available?

About how much does a second-hand one sell at?

Are canoes or *kyaks*, or rowboats to be had at Nome?

The average temperature around Nome in July?

Are polar bears killed in Bering Straits? If not, where can a sight of them be obtained?

Is wood available for fuel on the Alaska Peninsula and the country north of Nome?

How many wool blankets would you advise for the parts of the country I have mentioned?

If this appears in *Adventure* please use my initials only."—R. P., Tacoma, Wash.

Answer, by Mr. Solomons:—Dutch Harbor is a small port station and is not likely to have much in the way of boats for sale. Doubtless you can pick up a second-hand canoe or other small boat. Can't say as to price.

Canoes, *kyaks* and rowboats are all to be had at Nome, or were when I was there. Might be second-hand, however. Don't try a *kyak* except in the presence of the life-saving crew.

At Nome the temperature would be about sixty in the shade in July, average of the daylight hours. It might freeze once or twice at night. It will occasionally all Summer, back from the salt water.

Polar bears are killed sometimes in Bering Sea—rarely, rather!—frequently in the straits and still more frequently in the Arctic—of course. You have to go after them as a rule to see them. I lived up in the Arctic Ocean ten years and I never saw one alive. I've seen 'em alive, but only in a circus down here. I've bought and traded for their skins, however—many of them.

Their best habitat is pretty far up, around Point Barrow. They live out on the ice mostly, but come in to the coast and find caves for breeding frequently—hibernating and to bring forth the young.

There are forests on the Alaska Peninsula. Nome is hundreds of miles north, but there are still forests back of the coast, not very extensive in any one place however. There is driftwood on the coast everywhere, and willows everywhere. You are seldom out of fuel in Alaska. Farther north on the Arctic tundras there is nothing but beach wood and stunted willows, and alder on the tundras, or rolling plains.

Wool blankets for northern Alaska are a nuisance. Use a reindeer bag, bought there or in Seattle, or lambs' wool comforters or quilts.

I don't know what your scheme is, but your questions show much pristine ignorance. Why not tell me what kind of suicide you are contemplating?

If you don't want an answer enough to enclose FULL return postage to carry it, you don't want it.

New Zealand's Pet Sport

THIS was written at the end of August—and Winter lingered in the lap of Spring:

Question:—"Would you be so kind as to settle an argument as to what constitutes the favorite sport of New Zealand? Also what seems to be the favorite animal or bird for gunners? I am enclosing a self-addressed envelop."—C. RUSSELL WHITEHOUSE, Cambridge, Mass.

Answer, by Mr. Mills:—Just now we are at the tail end of the Winter season and opening out into Spring. Winter sports still prevail, and there is no doubt whatever as to what our favorite sport is—Rugby football. The New South Wales rep. team is over from Australia touring New Zealand, and its games are drawing tens of thousands of spectators. We have no other pastime all the year round that attracts such crowds as football does. We also play hockey, but it is a long way after the oval ball.

In Summer we have cricket for the national pastime, with tennis very popular also. On the gambling side horse-racing draws tremendously all over the Dominion all the year round.

Our sportsmen go gunning for deer back in the ranges in both the North and the South Island. The native pigeon is also sought after.

The wild pig is always in season—and full of peril to the man with the gun and the dog. Hunting for wapiti has begun in the far south. Rabbits and hares are to be got all over the land. Indeed and in short New Zealand is something in the nature of a sportsman's paradise, something being always in season for gun and rod.

How a Shotgun's Gage Is Measured

A SYSTEM that requires no instruments of precision:

Question:—"Would you please advise me why a twelve-gage is a twelve-gage and why a twenty-gage is a twenty-gage and how the gage was first determined in the ancient smooth-bores?

I have asked several persons in this district about this subject, but they could not clearly explain the situation so have taken the liberty to call on you to clear up the haze, so to speak. I have somewhere read about the whys and wherefores of the question but just can't lay my hands on it at the present time when I in turn need to answer the same question."—WILLIAM L. MAULE, Minden, Nev.

Answer, by Mr. Thompson:—The standard of measuring guns in the old days is still retained now. It is the number of round balls that make an ounce load, as for instance in twelve-gage twelve went to ounce; in sixteen, sixteen went to the ounce, etc. It is very simple. If I can give you further information please advise.

Address your question direct to the expert in charge, NOT to the magazine.

Note from an "A. A." Man

JUST a word from Raymond Spears, writing from California:

I'm enclosing a batch of letters and answers, one marked "Good," the others more or less commonplace, but picking good ones is difficult, for to tell the truth, I get a kick out of most of them—some new inquiry, some new longing, some penetrating look beyond what I have myself seen.

"Big Jim" Harriman and I are getting together on a trip, cruise, or something together. Planned the Colorado River, down, but trouble in Mexico, and what others call "uninteresting" conditions of desolation holding this notion up. However, I've an outboard motor and a canvas boat on the way, and we're going—don't know where for sure! January or later.

Knuckled down to work, now that we are in a bungalow "permanent," and b'lieve me—I got to work!

Letters all balled up for a while—I drove ten thousand miles from October to October inclusive, seeing "with my own eyes," and doggone, a man gets to know a lot of things that aren't so as judged when seen by himself! Imagination, books, documents, photos give but a faint conception of "the real thing." But fiction gives better idea often than the fact-stuff! Wonder why?

Best regards! Seems odd, away out here! But the auto roads make us closer together, now, than up-State, N. Y., was to N. Y. City when I was a boy.

Yours,
SPEARS.

Hunting in Ontario

EQUIPMENT—necessities—expenses:

Question:—"I want your advice on where to go for a light hunting trip for an amateur. My health is run down, and a vacation with something to interest me and away from people appeals to me. I don't know anything about hunting or woodcraft. I would like to go to a beautiful place with a healthy climate and near by to a large city, like Montreal. where I can get a job at my trade, so that I can hunt one week, then go back to work next, hunt the third, then work again, etc.

What equipment would I need? What kind of gun is best? What do you think of a Colt automatic? Is it powerful enough for light game, good for short distances (I don't know how to shoot) and more comfortable than a bulky revolver?

What would be the expenses of such a trip every week?"—HARRY SCHIFF, New York.

Answer, by Mr. Catton:—If I get you right you want to locate permanently, somewhere where the climate is healthy—you say you are in poor health but don't state what is wrong—and where you can work in a city or large town at your trade—but you haven't said what your trade is—and where you can get out for a hunting trip every second week at not too great a distance and at reasonable expense. Is that right?

Well, first, not knowing what your trade is, I can't locate you in a large town where there would be work at your trade. Next, not knowing what it is that ails your health I can hardly locate you in a climate that would be healthy for you, can I? And lastly good hunting grounds are never to be found in the immediate vicinity of a large city or town. However, I will do the best I can, and you can write again, giving particulars and details, if this answer is not satisfactory.

Trades as a rule in Canada don't allow their workingmen to work every other week unless that was the special arrangement in advance. Then too the trades, as well as unskilled labor, are full up here, and the wages paid are very poor for both.

Yet your arrangement might be made and might work all right. It all depends on your particular trade, the class of workman you are and where you managed to locate. If you located in a large town or city you would have to go quite a distance for good hunting, and that would be expensive. But there are lots of small towns along the railroads in northern Ontario where you might obtain a job at your trade, whatever that is, and then you would not have to go more than a few miles for good hunting.

As to the climate, well, would this climate be good for what ails you? Summer is three months—June, July, August; Fall is three months—September, October, November; Winter is three months—December, January, February; and Spring is three months—March, April and May. That is in southern Ontario. But north of Toronto Winter means five months—middle of November to the middle of April, and June, July and August are the only Summer months. The temperature ranges from the extremes of forty or more below zero to one hundred or more in the shade, with lots of snow in the Winter and lots of rain in the Spring and Fall, and cold, raw winds any old time.

Am enclosing list of authoritative books that you would do well to buy and read and digest and remember and take with you for reference, as you say you know nothing about woodcraft. Equipment for hunting trip depends on what kind of game you are going after, how far you are going to travel and how long you will be away. If you are not going far, a matter of a few miles only from a source of supplies, you will need but little; if you are going a long way and intend to spend a week or longer you will need quite a lot of things. For small game, partridges, rabbits, ducks, etc., you will take a shotgun—No. 12 bore, double-barreled; for deer, moose, caribou, bear, etc., you will take a rifle—250-3000 Savage is, in my estimation all that can be desired; certainly nothing of small caliber. A pistol or revolver isn't worth a tinker's dam!

And in both cases, whether you are after large or small game, take a good heavy knife in a sheath, lots of ammunition, lots of matches in a waterproof case, extra lenses for your glasses if you wear glasses, lots of tobacco if you use it, a few fish-hooks and a line, a roll or coil of strong cord in your pocket, and wear adequate clothing and shoes against the possible sudden changes in the weather. You'll want all that, besides your food, if you are going out for only a day. If you are going out for a week— But wait a minute. First, before you go into unknown country or bush, if only for a day, get some old resident to draw you a good rough map of the waterways and other conspicuous landmarks.

For a trip of a week or longer you will need all of the above and the following anyway: Grub for one week for one man; flour (self-rising) 6 pounds; bacon, 4 pounds; tea, half-pound; coffee, half-pound; sugar, 2 pounds; rice, 1 pound; beans (dry) 2 pounds; raisins, 2 pounds; cornmeal or oatmeal, 1 pound; powdered milk, half-pound; pepper, salt. Use your bacon-fat for grease and go easy on anything else you may want to take. The above totals 20 pounds, which with your rifle, ammunition, etc., will make a heavy load for a long hike. This twenty pounds of grub is what I myself would take for a week's trip, and would be supplemented with fish caught in the streams and lakes and fresh meat shot as I needed it and located it.

And you will need a set of aluminum camp dishes, the kind that nest, one half-gallon sauce-pan, one ten-inch fry-pan or skillet with long handle and a covered two-quart pail; a camp stake or a few yards of stove-pipe wire, a tiny light tent to sleep under—unless you want to take chances on the weather and sleep out and maybe get caught in the rain with no chance of shelter handy—and a rough map of the district. These are necessities only; anything else you may take for your comfort will add weight to your pack.

Expenses for a week's hunting trip, aside from gun and ammunition, would not be less than $15. Though after the first trip you will learn how to cut down some on the expense. After your first trip your grub and ammunition will be about all the big expense. And don't forget soap and a towel and your tooth-brush and—matches! Matches! Matches! In a *water-proof* case!

Write again for more or detailed information.

Free service, but don't ask us to pay the postage to get it to you.

Agriculture in Portuguese East

LIKE every tropical enterprise it takes capital—big capital—these days:

Question:—"Is there a chance for me in Africa? I am a machinist by trade. I understand the automobile business well and can repair any make of automobile. My age is 42. I am really disgusted there is no more prospect for a man. I would like to go some place. I would consider agriculture if it is a chance. You will find stamps inside."—WM. OLSZINSKI, Spotswood, N. J.

Answer, by Mr. Waring:—I must say that I am rather surprized that your trade as a machinist holds out no prospect for you, in a country second to none in every branch of mechanics.

You are contemplating a change, and your thoughts turn to agriculture on a foreign soil, preferably Africa. You do not say whether you have any capital, but unless you have, I assure you that it is useless to think about it. Tropical agriculture takes considerable capital to get any kind of a start, for you could not find a holding ready for you, nor could you homestead a section as we understand it here. Then again a white man does no manual work on his tropical farm, for in the first place he would lose prestige with the natives, and secondly the climate would be against him.

There is also one other feature, and that is the language. You would find it absolutely necessary to know Portuguese. In your case, I would say, "Don't consider Africa for a moment." If agriculture is your choice there are plenty of opportunities nearer home, with better markets and better shipping facilities. If you must go out of the U. S. to get to "some place," then I think you might look toward South America, especially Argentina.

Now, sir, in conclusion, if you have $10,000 to start in at African farming write me again, and I will go into the matter further and tell you what you can do and where to go, and how to go about it.

"Ask Adventure" service costs you nothing whatever but reply postage and self-addressed envelop.

New Mexico

THE following monograph, printed on hard paper, may be had free by writing the "A. A." expert who wrote it—H. F. Robinson, 200-202 Korber Block, Albuquerque, N. M. Be sure to enclose self-addressed envelop and two-cent stamp not attached:

AREA; Elevation. New Mexico, the first portion of the United States to be permanently settled—the first settlement being in 1598—and which was until 1847 a part of Mexico, is the fourth largest State in the union and has an area of 122,503 square miles. In elevation it varies from about 3,000 feet above sea level at its lowest point in the southeastern part to 13,306 feet at the top of Truches Peak near Santa Fé. New Mexico has every variety of climate, flora and fauna from subtropical to arctic.

Population is approximately 370,000.

Heat. New Mexico has the reputation of being hot, and stories abound with tales of the withering heat of the country. but if the truth must be told the temperatures of most of the State are not at all high. Albuquerque, which represents a good average for the entire State, has a mean annual temperature of 56°. The highest record for this city in over twenty years is 101°, and in the past sixteen the maximum was 97°.

Timber. New Mexico has more yellow pine than any State in the union excepting Oregon and Washington. There are six National Forests in the State with a combined area of 9,607,559 acres.

Mineral Wealth. It is a heavily mineralized region, and most of the metals and valuable minerals found anywhere in the United States exist here. Gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, iron—there has been found an entire mountain of the latter. The greatest deposit of bituminous coal in any one State, and the only deposit of anthracite coal, save one, west of Pennsylvania. Her salt lakes could produce enough salt to supply the world for a considerable time. Coronado mined sulfur near Jemez in 1540 and used it in the manufacture of gunpowder.

Wonderful mica deposits have been uncovered, and in the northern part of the State and in the adjacent region of Colorado are the biggest vanadium deposits in the country. Deposits of kaolin, gypsum, meerschaum and other valuable minerals and earths are to be found.

Nor are jewels entirely missing, for within the State boundaries are found turquoise, garnet, amethyst, beryl, sapphire, opal, peridot, jasper and olivine. In Bulletin No. 624 of the Geological Survey, "Useful Minerals of the United States," there are listed as found in New Mexico one hundred thirty-five valuable minerals and metals.

Oil. New Mexico has oil. At the end of 1923 it was not yet producing heavily, but a number of fields of promise are known in various parts of the State. Drilling is progressing in Colfax, Harding, Quay, San Miguel, Santa Fé, Chaves, Eddy, Luna, McKinley and San Juan Counties. Wells in the southeast part of the State in the Pecos Valley are producing oil in limited quantities from shallow depths with promise of rather extensive fields. In McKinley County the Seven Lakes region has brought in a number of small wells at shallow depths.

The most promising outlook is now in San Juan County. Here a number of big gas wells have come in near Aztec, while on the Navajo Reservation the Shiprock structure has already produced three flowing wells, the larger with a flow of about 2,400 barrels of a very high grade paraffin base oil, of high specific gravity.

Topography. The continental divide extends north and south in the western part of the State. On the one side the waters run to the Gulf of Mexico and on the other to the Pacific. High mountains lie in the north, central and southwestern parts and great plains, the Llano Estacado or Staked Plains, lie on the southeastern part, and in the south-central the famed Jornado del Muerte or Journey of Death. North, east and also northwest from the Jornado are great lava beds.

Railroads. From east to west and from north to south extend lines of the Santa Fé Railroad. From the northeast to the central south is the Rock Island and across the southwestern corner comes the Southern Pacific, while a spur of the Denver & Rio Grande comes as far as Santa Fé and the New Mexico Central from Santa Fé to a connection with the Rock Island. The Santa Fé Northwestern is also building from Bernalillo north.

Automobile Roads. Good automobile highways traverse the State in all directions. Following the Santa Fé Railroad is the Santa Fé Trail, which is also a part of the National Old Trails Highway as well as the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway. From Albuquerque there is a choice of two roads west.

The Overland Highway, the Dixie and Southern National Highway and the Bankhead traverse parts of the State from east to west, and the Camino Real, the Colorado to Gulf and a link of the Park to Park Highways from north to south. These with the connecting State roads make the State an easy one to get over. Most of the roads are dirt roads, some are hard-surfaced and there are a few sections paved.

Hot Springs. New Mexico has several groups of wonderful hot springs, some of them the hottest in existence, and with great medicinal value and curative properties.

Climate and Health. "Take a map and place one point of a compass on Albuquerque, and with the other describe a circle which will touch the Mexican border, west Texas, southern Colorado and eastern Arizona. Within this circle you have what might be termed the well country, with Albuquerque as its heart. If you are in search of health the nearer you live to the heart of the well country the better chance you have to get well."

The climate of New Mexico is unsurpassingly pure and healthy. A sultry day is rare. The Summer nights are cool and pleasant. The Winters are long but uniform. The atmosphere is of exceptional dryness. There is little rain. There is about 76 per cent. of possible sunshine. All of which makes the State an almost ideal place for the cure of tuberculosis. The Government maintains a sanatorium at Fort Stanton for sailors and marines, and one at Fort Bayard for soldiers. Nearly every town and city in the State is supplied with private sanatoria.

Civilization in New Mexico. Four stages of civilization have existed in New Mexico: The present or American; back of this the Spanish, which came with the Spaniards in 1540. When they came they found the civilization of the Pueblo Indian with at least seventy villages, cultivated fields and extensive irrigation. Coexistent with them were the nomadic Indians not so highly civilized. And before them were a prehistoric race, living in well-built cities with houses of stone, some of them four stories high, and they were cultivating irrigated fields. Their ditches and irrigation works were as well laid out as if run by modern engineers. They have entirely disappeared, and we know only that they were here for an unknown period, beginning at least one thousand years ago.

All that remains are the mighty ruins, some in cities down on the plains and others are cliff dwellings, where houses are built on the cliffs, and some were cave dwellings. One building at Pueblo Bonito, which is one of the earliest apartment houses, had four stories and covered a greater area than the Capitol at Washington.

Today the traveler can see at one time the nomadic Indian, the pueblo dweller, the Spanish occupation and the present Anglo-American development.

Indian Dances and Ceremonies. Indian dances and ceremonies may be seen any month in the year. Each tribe has its own dances. With the exception of a few they have no regular date each year, so a list can not be made showing their occurrence. "In number, variety, religious significance, highly detailed symbolism, color, movement and music, they can not be surpassed by the aboriginal ceremonies of any country."

Game, Hunting and Fishing. There is still plenty of hunting and fishing in the State. Big game abounds in the higher mountains, and most of the mountain streams are full of trout; and at Elephant Butte is fine bass fishing. License is required for both hunting and fishing. If this is of interest to you send for a separate leaflet showing the game laws and information regarding game.

Agriculture. New Mexico will never be a great agricultural State owing to its arid character; agriculture being limited to the sections where there is water for irrigation. There are two large reclamation projects in the State—Elephant Butte and Hondo. The upper Rio Grande Valley has a large area under cultivation; and on the Pecos, in the San Juan Valley, near Las Vegas and in other parts of the State smaller areas are under successful cultivation. In many parts especially in the mountain valleys are considerable areas cultivated without irrigation. About 900,000 acres are under irrigation and 150,000 are farmed without irrigation.

Government Lands for Entry. There are large areas of Government land which are open to entry; but much of it, for want of water, is practically valueless in the small areas that may be taken up. A special leaflet will be sent those interested in this.

Schools. Financed by a grant from the Government of some six million acres of land for the support of its common schools, New Mexico has a school system of which any State could be proud. Compulsory education with a minimum nine-month school year is rapidly eradicating illiteracy. In addition to the common schools are numerous high schools, two normal schools, the university at Albuquerque, State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts at Las Cruces, School of Mines at Socorro, State Military Academy at Roswell, a school for the blind and one for the deaf. There are a number of fine business colleges. Various mission and similar schools are successfully conducted, and the Government maintains numerous day schools and five or six large boarding-schools for the Indians.

Artists. New Mexico is becoming a mecca for the artists, and two large and successful colonies are recognized, one in Santa Fé and one in Taos, where the wonderful scenery and colorful Indian life offer unexcelled possibilities for them.

Museum. At Santa Fé are the School of Archeology and a very fine museum.

Places of Interest for Tourists to Visit. Cliff dwellings. Ruins of prehistoric civilization. The Indian pueblos. Newly discovered cave in the southeastern part of the State, lately made a National Monument, which is larger and finer than the Mammoth Cave.

Ice caves in several parts of the State, where ice is found the year round. Elephant Butte Dam and reservoir. Inscription Rock. Pajarito Park with its ruins and cave dwellings. Puye Cave Dwellings. Pueblo Bonito.

The white sands. The lava flows.

Details of these places of interest can be furnished on special request. Most of these things can be visited with only short detours from the regular highways.

Bibliography. The following books, among others, will be of value in learning about New Mexico. They should be found in any good library: Bancroft, Hubert Howe, "Arizona and New Mexico;" Bandelier, Adolf E., "The Delight Makers;" Fewkes, Jesse Walter, Various Monographs in American Bureau of Ethnology Reports; Hackett, C. T., "The Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of 1680;" Hewett, Edgar L., "The Pâjaritan Culture;" James, George Wharton, "New Mexico, the Land of the Delight Makers;" Price, L. Bradford, "A Concise History of New Mexico;" Read, Benjamin M., "Illustrated History of New Mexico;" Ryan, Marsh Ellis, "The Flute of the Gods;" Saunders, C. S. and E. H.. "Indians of the Terraced Houses;" Twitchell, Ralph E., "Leading Facts of New Mexico History;" Wallace, Susan, "The Land of the Pueblos."

Salmon-Fishing on the Lower Columbia

TYEE is Chinook for a chief or head man; hence by extension for the best of the salmon run on the Columbia River:

Question:—"I will appreciate some information on the salmon-fishing industry on the Columbia River, especially about the boats fishing outside and on the bar outside of Astoria. I have been up around that country but have never fished there. Have had some experience with tuna fishing in Southern California. I have a little idea of the size of the boats, and also the tackle used.

What would a good stanch bar boat cost to build?

Can you sell fish to any cannery or just to certain ones? What is the average price paid per pound for fish?

About how much fish does one catch in a day?

When does the season begin, and what time does it end?

Please do not publish my name." —**A. T. P.,** Brooklyn, N. Y.

Answer, by Mr. B. Brown:—Most of the fishing on the lower Columbia River and outside of the bar is now done in motor boats, one of which, adapted to that purpose, can be had at a minimum price of around $2,500, although occasionally one that has been in use for some years can be had cheaper. Gill-netting is the principal way of taking salmon from the boats thus in use.

The open season for the Spring run of fish is May 1, closing August 25, and the Fall run commences September 10. Fishing is closed always during the season from 6 o'clock Saturday afternoon until 6 o'clock Sunday afternoon. Further, the season may be shortened at any time in the discretion of the fish commissioners of the two States. All salmon-fishing is under close regulation. Write to the fish commissioner of Washington, at Seattle, and you can get full list of regulations and laws and the new regulations applicable only to this year.

The price of fish is fixed each season, by agreement between the fishermen's union and the canneries, and varies year by year. Sample rates would be around 30 cents for tyees ranging down to 15 cents for smaller fish. The number of fish to be caught is a matter of individual luck; and as a practically uniform rule, fishermen average a good year's wages for the season's work. You can sell fish to any one of the canneries, but the price when fixed applies to all of the canneries and all of the fishermen.

Old Songs That Men Have Sung

Devoted to outdoor songs, preferably hitherto unprinted—songs of the sea, the lumber-camps, Great Lakes, the West, old canal days, the negro, mountains, the pioneers, etc. Send in what you have or find, so that all may share in them.

Although conducted primarily for the collection and preservation of old songs, the editor will give information about modern ones when he can do so and *IF* all requests are accompanied with self-addressed envelop and reply postage (*NOT* attached). Write to Mr. Gordon direct, *NOT* to the magazine.

Conducted by R. W. GORDON, 1262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif.

JUST as it is proper in telling a fairy story to begin with the words "Now once upon a time" and to close the tale with "And they lived happily ever afterward," so in folk songs it is proper for the singer in telling of certain situations to fall back upon phrases almost as stereotyped as those of the fairy story. Whenever, for example, a horse is called for the lines will run—

Go saddle me the black, the black,
  Go saddle me the brown;
Go saddle me the swiftest steed
  That ever rode to town.

There is no thought here of any choice between horses of different colors; the lines have become fixed and unchangeable. Nor is there any thought of distance in the lines that are inevitably used whenever one of the characters sets out on a journey—

He hadna gane a mile, a mile,
A mile but only three.

One of the favorite endings for the tragic love ballad has one of the lovers buried in the church and one in the choir, whereupon living plants spring from the bodies and intertwine, joining forever in death those who were parted in life:

Lord William was buried in St. Mary's kirk,
  Lady Margaret in Mary's quire.
Out o' the lady's grave grew a bonny red rose,
  And out o' the knight's a brier.

And they twa met and they twa plat,
  And fain they wad be near,
And a' the warld might ken right weel
  They were twa lovers dear.

Such lines recurring frequently in any given situation or in any given type of story we call *commonplaces*, and so thoroughly have these commonplaces become part and parcel of the style that it would never occur to a singer to omit or to alter them.

Each type of song, however, may have its own commonplaces differing greatly from those found in other types. For example, the commonplaces found in negro songs will be entirely different from those found in the old English and Scottish ballads, and the commonplaces of the "broadsides"—songs printed on single sheets of paper and hawked about at fairs—will not be the same as those in the more genuine unprinted songs of the folk or in their prose tales. A thorough study of these traits will often throw much light upon the age, origin and history of any given song.

Recently I have become much interested in collecting and comparing the many songs concerning criminals and outlaws. Certain groups of these show striking similarities in the way in which the story is told.

Usually it is the criminal himself who speaks, and almost invariably in this case he tells his name and his place of birth in the first stanza, often using the words, "My name I'll ne'er deny" or, "The truth to you I'll tell." He has left home at the age of seventeen, twenty-one or twenty-three. He speaks with tenderness of his aged parents and stresses his careful upbringing.

He tells in some detail the story of the trial, including the passing of the sentence by the judge and its recording by the clerk. Here it is proper for the aged parents to appear, the father "pleading at the bar" the mother "weeping and tearing her hair." After this the sister, wife or sweetheart, as the case may be, speaks the final words of regret.

The prisoner is then either hanged or left serving his term in the penitentiary. In either case—though it's a bit incongruous when he has been already executed—he concludes with a warning to others to "shun bad company."

These traits seem in general to appear most frequently in American rather than in English songs, though I strongly suspect that most of them had their origin in English broadsides. They can be seen best in those songs which group themselves about "The Boston Burglar," "Charlestown," "Charles Guiteau," "Bendall," etc., although traces of these conventions may be found in versions of "John Henry" and "Frankie and Johnnie" and appear distinctly in "McAffie's Confession," "Root Hog or Die," "Lackey Bill," "Sam Bass," "The Lone Star Trail," and others.

How persistent these conventions sometimes are may be seen in "McAffie's Confession." At the time when McAffie left home both his parents were dead—

My mother and my father dear
Were silent in their deep, dark grave,
Their spirits gone to Him Who gave

yet after he has been imprisoned for the murder of his wife we find the following verses:

Only a mother standing by
To hear them tell the reason why
Her son in prison he must lie
Till on the scaffold he must die.

My father, sixty years of age,
The best of counsel did engage
To see if something could be done
To save his disobedient son.

THE following copy of "The Boston Burglar" came to me through Mrs. M. E. Newson, who obtained it from her father, Mr. G. E. Elwood:

The Boston Burglar

I was born in Boston city, a place you all know well,
Brought up by honest parients—the truth to you I'll tell—
Brought up by honest parients, and raised most tenderlie
Till I became a roving blade at the age of twenty-three.

My character was taken then, and I was sent to jail;
My friends they tried to clear me, but 'twas of no avail.
The jury found me guilty, the clerk he wrote it down,
The judge he passed the sentence, and I was sent to Charlestown.

To see my aged father a-standing at the bar,
Likewise my aged mother a-tearing of her hair,
A-tearing of her old gray locks while tears came rolling down
Saying, "Son, dear son, what have you done to go to Charlestown?"

I was put on board an east-bound train one cold December day,
And every station we passed by I heard the people say,
"There goes that Boston Burglar; in iron he's bound down,
For something or another he's going to Charlestown."

All you who have your liberty, pray keep it if you can
And don't go round the streets at night and break the laws of man,
For if you do you'll surely rue and find yourself like me
A-serving out twenty-one years in the penitentiary.

There are, of course, many outlaw ballads that in no way resemble this particular type. Among these are "Jesse James," "Cole Younger," "Stackerlee," "Dick Turpin," "Jack Donohoe," "Captain Kidd," "Jack Williams" and many others. I'd be mighty glad, however, to have copies of any of these that some of you may know, for my own copies are often fragmentary and confused.

SEND all contributions of old songs and all questions about them direct to R. W. GORDON, 1262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif. Do NOT send them to the magazine.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

APRIL 10TH ISSUE

Besides the **novel** and **two complete novelettes** mentioned on the second contents page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

THE PROFESSOR'S BOMB — *James K. Waterman*
The inventor said it would kill a whale.

THE LOB-STICK — *William Byron Mowery*
A white man, an Indian—and a murder.

THE KING OF NO MAN'S LAND **A Four-Part Story** **Part III** — *Arthur O. Friel*
A race against time and jungle peril.

RIDING BACK — *Raymond S. Spears*
Man and horse—both untamed.

CARSTAIRS PLAYS A HUNCH — *Magda Leigh*
The captain feared more than the heavy sea.

THE LONGSTRIKER — *Frank Robertson*
He sheared sheep for other things than money.

Still Farther Ahead

IN the three issues following the next there will be *long stories* by Leonard H. Nason, Hugh Pendexter, Frederick Moore, Charles Victor Fischer, W. C. Tuttle, Thomson Burtis, Captain Mansfield, W. Townend, John Webb, William Ashley Anderson; and short stories by George E. Holt, F. St. Mars, Nevil Henshaw, J. D. Newsom, J. H. Greene, Dale Collins, William Byron Mowery, Barry Scobee, H. C. Bailey, Michael J. Phillips and others—stories of the South Seas, the Navy, Morocco, the War, the West, the Philippines, the Border, the sea, Africa, Labrador, Medieval France, the Old Frontier, soldiers, sailors, cowboys, aviators, Cajans, knights-at-arms, adventurers the world around.

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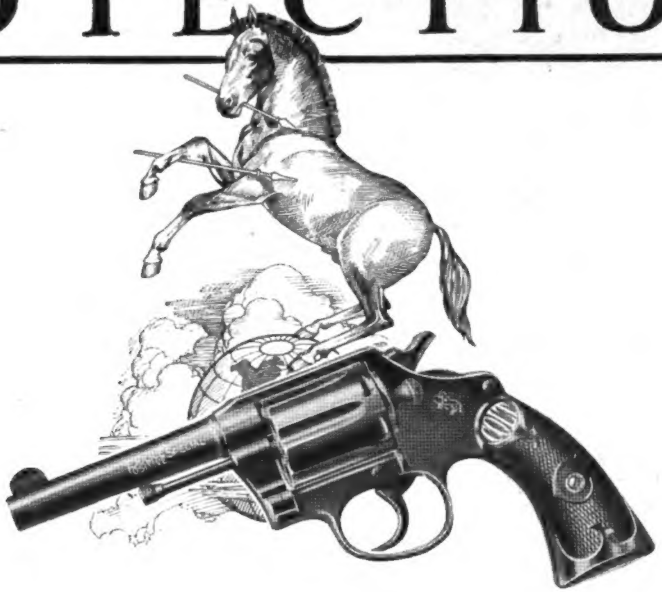

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